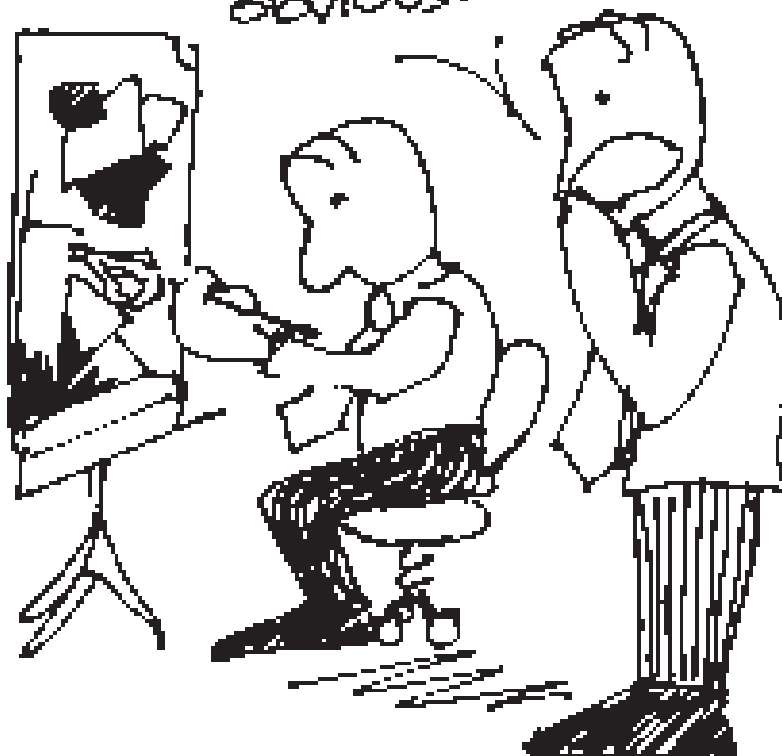


Hmm... I like the
cubist pie chart but
your abstract bar
graph's a bit
obvious...



The Cultural Commission

a missed opportunity - or worse?

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Comment

There are two parallel but separate things which have been going on in Scottish policy-making over recent months – the report of the Cultural Commission and the cut in business rates. Comparing them is revealing and somewhat depressing. Writers in this issue cover the background to the Cultural Commission in some detail. The short version is that the First Minister made one of his 'this is my great priority' speeches on St Andrews Day two years ago, leading many people to believe that he was interested in Scottish cultural policy. The evidence that he is actually interested was minimal before the speech and no better afterwards, but having thrown the rhetoric out there he rather backed himself into a corner and had to do something. This led to an inquiry which produced conclusions he didn't like so he set up the Cultural Commission in a blaze of publicity in no small part to distract us all. After a somewhat bizarre and exasperating inquiry, the Commission eventually reported. With barely a pause the Scottish Executive more or less told us all that it wasn't going to pay much attention, which was a remarkably consensual position given that nobody could muster any enthusiasm for the Commission or its report.

If this sounds like a somewhat grudging interpretation of events, consider the commitment and approach to the project in terms of the appointment of the Commission itself. The panel of the great and good which was appointed to set out a vision and road map for the future of the arts in Scotland consisted of a total of one practicing artist (musician Craig Armstrong). So he promptly resigned, to be replaced by comparatively Executive-friendly singer Sheila Wellington, who herself remained fairly openly critical. The rest of the Commission was dominated by business figures and a few administrative types. There was barely a person working in the arts who held out much hope for a visionary outcome from the moment they saw who was on the Commission. When it started to invite views from the wider community, a degree of despair set in; the Commission seemed to be obsessed by one question which had been buzzing around the Scottish Executive for a while. Why anyone thought that 'ensuring cultural entitlement' was a helpful starting point for a debate on the future of the arts will remain a mystery, but it skewed everything the Commission did from that point onwards.

It is worth stopping and dwelling on this question for a while; or, more accurately, it is worth dwelling on what this question tells

us about the interaction between mainstream left politics (if we are to be ideologically generous to the Scottish Executive) and 'culture'. Understanding this question and its meaning is difficult without recalling the whole Scottish Opera affair. Certainly there are those of all political persuasions who questioned the level of subsidy that was given to Scottish Opera, particularly as a proportion of the total arts budget. What is undeniable is that the outcome was the emasculation of a Scottish artistic achievement of international recognition. It was the production of the Ring Cycle which caused much of the problem and yet it was the Ring Cycle which really sealed Scottish Opera's international reputation (well, just before that reputation was more or less destroyed). This was all happening at a time when the financial approach of the Scottish Executive was becoming ever-more functional – pay this, get that. But not only was functionality driving policy, there was a clear and identifiable strand of anti-intellectualism running through policy – vocational education over 'academic' education, compliant agencies over free-thinking NGOs, profitable popular culture over 'high art'.

Putting these things together, there were those in the Scottish Executive who despised what they thought were the condescending snobs of the 'high art brigade' and those who thought that the purpose of public spending was to Get Things Done. And so the Cultural Commission was encouraged to work out how social inclusion could be tackled through arts policy – working classes in, upper middle classes out and cure poverty at the same time. It would be overly-generous to describe this as well meaning but stupid; it wasn't the slightest well meaning. What it revealed is a strand of left (particularly but not exclusively Labour) politics which is reductive in its approach to intellectualism. This strand of thinking takes the side of what it considers the working man against what it considers the rich and in doing so finds itself fighting for Tammy Wynette over Giuseppe Verdi. Trying to find a coherent reason for this (saying 'ah kens whit ah likes' only gets you so far) involved the idea that lower socioeconomic groups were 'excluded' from this kind of high art and that drawing them back into the arts would be an act of inclusion and would therefore have social benefits. The idea that the arts would have any benefit in themselves seems not to have played any part in this thinking.

It is difficult to know where to begin in challenging this idea. It is worth starting with the cause of the apparent exclusions and in doing so it is worth discounting price almost immediately, because it was possible to get a ticket for Scottish Opera for no

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more than it costs to get a multiplex ticket. In fact, the exclusion is largely educational. Our education system has become much more functional than even our arts policy, with job-readiness seeming to be the only goal of a secondary, further or higher education. You're designated as failing to gain any understanding of the history of art (or history full stop for that matter)? OK, best thing for you is a quick training as a call centre operator – we can have you earning by the age of 16. This will at least be a more honest approach once we have a vocational qualification in chimney sweeping for eight-year-olds. There is such a chronic shortage of music teachers in the Glasgow state sector schools that there is no meaningful instrument instruction left. So to summarise the Scottish policy, we educate them in anything other than the arts and then when they don't participate in the arts we close down the arts. In return, we train everyone to work and celebrate television talent shows.

And so by the time the Cultural Commission gets to the last phase of its work it issues a final consultation paper which has almost 100 questions of which about 80 per cent seem to be wholly about enshrining a 'cultural entitlement'. Oh were that to have meant an entitlement to be taught about the glories of our international cultural heritage and not what was beginning to look like some form of rationing. The other questions were about the administrative structure through which funding should be channelled. It is almost impossible to believe, until you remember who was on the Commission.

End result? A report no-one wants, no-one agrees with and which will be forgotten in a matter of months. The only good it did was to call for an extra £100 million to be invested in the arts. And where are we left? A policy vacuum which is actually slightly preferable to the chip-on-the-shoulder posturing which preceded it. And Scottish culture? Well, thankfully no-one was actually waiting for guidance and it turns out the writers just kept writing, the singers just kept singing and the painters just kept painting. We still have a strong cultural scene in Scotland, but that is largely despite policy-makers. What doesn't survive is the work that needs subsidy – for all those who moaned about Scottish Opera's funding it is worth remembering that Welsh National Opera is happily funded at a much higher level from a much smaller budget. So at least there is some hope for the other strand of left thinking on the arts – that our cultural heritage is an international inheritance which belongs to all humankind and which enlivens, enriches and raises up all that it touches.

The other example alluded to at the beginning was the case of business rates. We have recently had £200 million of our money handed over to the business sector as a reward for being fashionable. In the terminally depressing rush to be most-free-market-of-all it seems that there is no market-populism which is too much to stomach in Scottish politics. Overnight the SNP has become more or less explicitly Thatcherite (at least in economic policy); the leader of the Liberal Democrats is musing about exploring a flat tax (a move which is so far to the right it makes the Poll Tax look like the work of the Quakers); and our First Minister doesn't have to think twice before telling everyone that not only is his first priority 'growing the economy', he will happily subordinate any other policy to this vague and ill-defined goal.

Which is why no commission was needed to establish whether cutting business rates would be wise, beneficial, affordable or the best use of public money. In fact, there is no-one who really thinks that it is. The world's leading thinkers on economic development recently trooped through the Fraser of Allender Institute to discuss what should be done for the Scottish economy. None of them put much faith in marginal tax cuts, most discredited untargeted tax cuts altogether and none suggested they were a priority. But informed judgement be damned; let ideology win out! So the Scotsman got what it wanted.

Compare the ideology – who was fighting for the working man now? Even the CBI knows that no-one is going to relocate to Scotland for a tiny share of a £200 million bung. Everyone knows perfectly well that much of this money is destined for the pockets of hairdressers or chain stores. No-one is really making the case that it will actually grow the economy – but then thankfully no-one is asking them to show it. If any other spending department gets 50p it is expected to fill in forms showing that it made £5 of difference. Not the private sector – this is free money and they are more than welcome to spend it on celebratory champagne.

But let's imagine that there **had** been a commission to examine the benefit of this philanthropy. Can you imagine it being made up of poets with a token businessman? It gives no pleasure to continually attack the Scottish Executive and it is much to be hoped that it will soon do us proud by protecting us from the Madness of King Blair and his clearly unhinged education policy. But there can be no other conclusion; those who govern us are ignorant, prejudiced and entirely in thrall to those who ought to be their courtiers. The whole thing has been a tragedy. Just don't expect to see it performed on a stage. ■

you'll have had your culture debate?

Mark Brown asks what good is a Cultural Commission when our politicians have yet to truly understand the arts?

The recently completed Cultural Commission report, most of the key proposals of which (such as new administrative and funding bodies for the arts) have been rejected by the Scottish Executive, was (at £600,000) an expensive and needlessly bureaucratic waste of time. We need a far broader, more philosophical debate about the, quite literally, immeasurable value of the arts and a sea change in the way in which politicians consider and make arts policy.

The political climate around the arts in Britain as a whole, and also in Scotland, has long been profoundly philistine. Scottish culture minister Patricia Ferguson also has responsibility for tourism and sport. Her Westminster counterpart Tessa Jowell (who I embarrassingly, if understandably, confused with her Blairite clone Patricia Hewitt on BBC Radio Scotland recently) has a portfolio which takes in not only culture but also media and sport. Tabloid journalists may enjoy calling the pair 'Ministers for Fun', but the lack of governmental priority for the arts implied by such broad-ranging departments is obvious. One need only consider the appalling treatment of the Scottish Opera chorus to see that arts funding is viewed as a luxury, an awkward expense which is a drain on health and education spending. It is never seen as an unquantifiable enhancement of people's lives which is dwarfed by the cost of the nuclear submarines on the Clyde or the war in Iraq.

Even associating the word 'value' with the arts takes one into difficult territory. The politicians and bureaucrats demand that the consequences of arts policy be set out and quantified as if they were comparable to policies on public transport or hospital waiting lists. In fact, whilst there may be obvious and observable benefits to Stornoway and Peebles following the opening of their An Lanntair and Eastgate arts centres, the benefits of art works themselves are, and I use this word advisedly and in the broadest possible sense, spiritual. In other words, works of art have no use value. Their purpose and benefit cannot be measured. As the great English playwright Howard Barker says - in response to the question, 'What use is this play to me?' - 'No use at all. If you need help, go to a therapist.'

Those of us who locate our politics in a democratic and anti-authoritarian form of socialism have long argued that a society is only as civilised as the position of its most vulnerable members. We might add that it is only as free, and as democratically mature, as the amount of freedom and resources it is prepared to grant to its artists. A truly mature political system would make arts funding contingent upon nothing other than the pursuit of quality by artists. It would drop the requirement for tangibles, such as national

cultural institutions to which government ministers can take the Swedish ambassador, and place a premium on the freedom of the artist. That freedom must include the freedom to fail, the freedom to set the cat among the political pigeons and the freedom to be perplexing and ambiguous.

Uniquely among the recipients of tax payers' money, artists should be given cash without any prior agreement as to how it is spent. The minute a politician starts demanding to know what the artist does with the money we are entering the realms of cultural prescription, and prescriptions sound the death knell of free art. For example, the recently announced inaugural programme of the National Theatre of Scotland (NTS) includes a piece, by the exciting playwright Anthony Neilson, which currently has no title and, as far as we know, has yet even to have found a conclusive concept in the dramatist's mind. I take my hat off to NTS artistic director Vicky Featherstone. In regard of Neilson, as well as a number of other areas of her programme, she has subverted the basis of state funding of the arts. Of course, it is true that various, especially national, arts institutions are given money, almost as of right, before they create their programmes. However, imagine if a theatre company had approached the Scottish Arts Council for project



funding, saying, 'Well, it will be written and directed by Anthony Neilson, it has no title and no concept as yet'. I suspect they might have been shown the door as quickly as David McLetchie at a public standards committee meeting.

The argument outlined above covers much of the ground I covered in a recent, short speech to the Federation of Scottish Theatre's (FST) conference in Pitlochry. Although it was meat and drink to many of the theatre practitioners and administrators in the audience, my position landed me in something of a stramash with fellow panellist Bryan Beattie, the 'arts consultant' and former adviser to the Minister for Tourism, Culture and Sport. It was 'naive' and 'ridiculous', said Beattie, to talk of arts policy in the terms I had discussed them. It was 'self-evident' that our politicians were not philistines. Indeed, artists and advocates for the arts had 'won the argument' with the Scottish Executive over the importance of the arts to society. We have, through the Cultural Commission, 'had the debate' about the arts, and now we need to move forward, alongside the Scottish Executive, the Arts Council, local government and others, in ironing out and implementing good policy.

It is true that Jack McConnell generated a certain amount of optimism with his 'arts for all' speech at Glasgow's Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama in 2003. Yet one swallow doesn't make a summer. The First Minister was otherwise engaged when the National Theatre of Scotland came to announce its programme on November 2. Tourism, Culture and Sport minister Ferguson gave a, mercifully brief, speech in his stead (before making her excuses and leaving). The historic launch of the NTS was neither important enough to demand an hour or so of McConnell's time nor of enough significance to keep Ferguson away from the rest of her portfolio for more than half-an-hour. Why did she leave so promptly? Did she have nothing more to say? Was she afraid that if she stayed for the media conference she might be asked a difficult, unanswerable question such as, 'Minister, what did you last see at the theatre, and what was your opinion of it?'. I suspect the reason was a combination of the two.

Ferguson, who lists 'photography' and 'reading' as her sole cultural interests in her parliamentary biography, has proved herself to be frighteningly lacking in thought where the arts are concerned. Asked about the difficulties of her three-in-one portfolio by Janice Forsyth on a recent Radio Scotland programme, the minister replied that culture and tourism were a good combination because, 'we have a lot of cultural tourism'. In her short speech at the NTS launch, Ferguson opined that Scottish theatre 'punches above its weight'. It was a strange phrase for the minister responsible for the arts to make. Artists and commentators use that phrase to explain that the arts in Scotland manage, often, to create work of extraordinary quality when one considers how low a priority is granted to culture by government. When the minister herself uses the phrase, one can only guess at what she means; or, indeed, if she even knows what she means herself!

There are those who believe that McConnell has systematically rooted out the most intelligent and capable Labour ministers from the Executive, and that culture is simply in the same boat as a number of other policy areas in being lumbered with such an obviously unimpressive minister as Ferguson. Yet, consider her predecessor, Minister for Pies and Having a Half-decent Record Collection, Frank McAveety, and one can see that the arts have not been well served by the Executive. When McAveety was still in post, he was asked on Newsnight Scotland about the role of a national arts company such as Scottish Opera or the new NTS. His immediate reply to Gordon Brewer was, 'education and outreach'. That, of course, isn't a considered opinion so much as an automatic sound bite. It's the kind of response that one could train an intelligent monkey to give. Brewer pressed the minister on the question. Hadn't Westminster culture minister Jowell recently published a paper which argued that the arts are of inherent value in and of themselves, and that they should not have to serve other governmental agendas, such as

education and 'social inclusion'? Wasn't his 'education and outreach' answer going directly against Jowell's case? McAveety, somewhat perplexingly, insisted that he agreed with everything in Jowell's pamphlet. When the ministers with responsibility for culture offer us such platitudes and contradictory nonsense, I stand by my accusation of philistinism.

Beattie may assert that I 'wouldn't be happy until Vaclav Havel was minister', but I'd settle for someone who had some genuine passion for and understanding of the arts, and whose portfolio was dedicated to culture alone. If Québec can have a Ministry of Culture and Communications (i.e. the arts, television and radio), why can't Scotland? Portugal, where the arguments for prioritisation of social spending over arts funding are even greater than they are in Scotland, has its own dedicated Ministry of Culture. The governmental position of the arts in Scotland is an embarrassment by comparison.

The head-to-head between Beattie and I at the FST conference was good knockabout stuff, but it was also indicative of something more significant. Beattie gave voice, in a more articulate and intelligent way than we could reasonably expect of ministers, to a complacency about arts policy which is truly worrying. When he says we've 'had the debate' through the Cultural Commission's soundings, he reminds one of the fictional Edinburgh man, who invites you round to his house at 7pm, only to greet you with the words, 'You'll have had your tea?'. If the Cultural Commission constitutes a genuine national debate about the arts, we might as well pack up our artistic bag and go home. ■

Mark Brown is a theatre critic, freelance journalist and teacher

the report is dead – long live the arts!

Eddie McGuire welcomes the rapid demise of the Cultural Commission report and calls on artists themselves to push forward Scotland's cultural scene

With headlines such as "Scottish Parliament Ditches Culture Report" (**Classical Music** 8/10/2005) and Culture Minister Patricia Ferguson giving it short shrift, the rejection of the Cultural Commission's report – coming in at over £1000 for each of its 590 pages – means we are back to square one as far as achieving a strategy for giving our arts and those who work in them the support they deserve. Be certain of one thing – this debacle will not hold back creative artists. They – poets, sculptors, novelists, composers, pipers, choirs, opera singers, ballet dancers to take a random sample – will continue to strive for excellence, often reaching world standards. Their public will strive to enjoy, learn, embrace often life-enhancing experiences. All will demand the highest standards of governance and support for what can be some of the greatest achievements for this and future society.

This special edition of **SLR** on the 'cultural front' comes at an apt moment – the 88 redundancies at what is Scotland's biggest employer of full time, contracted arts workers are beginning to bite as highly skilled singers from Scottish Opera are forced to move to Leeds, work as taxi drivers, café staff, in temporary educational projects – or face unemployment. This despite long efforts by the unions involved – Equity, Bectu and the Musicians' Union – to negotiate a solution. Yet in the case of the orchestra, the strength of the contract brokered means that they are able to continue to play throughout this 'dark' year, organising a tour of Scotland and taking in backing folk and traditional acts at events such as Celtic Connections (that runaway success of Glasgow's own 'municipal' arts policy). This bridging of the perceived folk-classical gulf leads me to a point of special importance to readers of this magazine: these three unions together with the new Artists Union, Writers Guild, Society of Playwrights and the NUJ (coming together in the Federation of Entertainment Unions) unite within their memberships a vast array of genres and styles.

Concepts of antagonism between 'high' or 'low' arts which seem to inform some politicians' thinking are not on the union agenda – harnessing support for its Folk and Traditional section is just as much a priority for the MU as organising support for its orchestral, instrumental teaching or composer members, as the recent broadly based picket and leafleting of the Highland Fling ballet (which used backing tapes instead of live musicians) showed. These unions continually campaign for the enhancement of skills in the Arts: as well as advocacy they have a hands-on role in co-operation with the Scottish

Union Learning Fund and the MU had an important role in the Youth Music Initiative (administered by the Scottish Arts Council) which, despite some recent backtracking, is funding singing and other music projects in primary education. So some progress is being achieved.

Building plenty of bridges to ensure a united arts voice does not falter under spurious antagonisms between genres is essential. A major step forward was the recent conference at the Scottish Parliament, called by Chris Ballance MSP, and chaired very ably by Joyce McMillan. Donald Gorrie was the only other MSP present, making a strong attack on current arts policies. The final leg was videoed for MSPs to later digest. There was an atmosphere of independent thinking, free of any hint of government pressure, and mercifully free of the 'think-tank', 'focus-group' or narrow self-interest mentality. Representing most active arts organisations and individuals, its value has been affirmed by the links now set up and maintained. A chance, then for united pressure on government for adequate funding to allow all the arts to flourish fully, fulfilling poet Aonghas MacNeacail's call in January 2004: "Don't fight each other for inadequate cash". Both he and Angus Calder pinpointed the massive resources being channelled into defence and war spending as a reason for shortfalls in Health, Education and Arts funding.

The realisation that devolution was not going to solve these intractable problems of funding the arts – indeed perhaps was the cause of some of them – led to rapidly-growing disenchantment and anger in the arts community

The realisation that devolution was not going to solve these intractable problems of funding the arts – indeed perhaps was the cause of some of them – led to rapidly-growing disenchantment and anger in the arts community. In this light, the setting up of a Cultural Commission can be seen as a device for releasing the pressure from this head of steam, to channel it. For some years the attack was coming from all sides, be it the 'dumbing down' of music exams, the shackling of the ability to have drama in schools, the rundown of libraries, mergers of orchestras, struggles to maintain Scottish Ballet, campaigns to save the architectural heritage, demands for a real National Theatre, withdrawal of grants to Wildcat, 7:84 and Scottish Amateur Drama Association, a chronically under-funded opera company, low pay in orchestras, the campaign against selling off Toward

educational arts facility, museums under threat, demands for a film studio and piping and other traditional arts being used by politicians but inadequately funded... the list goes on. Probably the final straw was reached with the widely publicised attack on the Executive's arts policy by dozens of leading writers, artists and musicians in September 2003. Writer Janice Galloway

attacked "the right wing tendency to reduce everything to financial benefit, alongside the phasing out of the idea of moral or humane benefit. This spiritual bankruptcy, still promoted as governmental prudence or even virtue, is shocking." Percussion soloist Evelyn Glennie, a staunch campaigner for music education, condemned cuts being made all round: "The domino effect is verging on catastrophic. Young musicians, as well as established ones who want to continue pushing the boundaries, are not able to fulfil their real potential due to lack of support." And this three years on from the launch of the National Cultural Strategy. (Poet Edwin Morgan described it as "very bad" – it had "forgotten literature"). Furthermore, ruling parties obsessed with short-term fixes, never seem to learn the lessons of even recent history. Remember the Charter for the Arts? It too aroused confused ideas about 'elitism'. In replying to Sheena Wellington, Denis White warned in 1992 "the steering group for the Charter are all administrators, not one creative person among them". This was the very fault in the set up of the new Cultural Commission that caused an immediate outcry, denunciations from composer James MacMillan (who saw it as a smokescreen for further attacks on Scottish Opera) and resignation after a very short period of Oscar-winning composer Craig Armstrong.

With the growing welter of scathing criticism of arts governance in the years leading up to the Commission and controversy over its very nature, the atmosphere surrounding it was bound to be fraught. Rather than Jack McConnell's idealistic St. Andrew's Day 'arts' speech being the spark that led to it being set up, the Commission was created to answer and defuse the virulent critics and find a solution, however drastic, to 'problems' like Scottish Opera while relieving the Executive of having to deal directly with such thisty tasks. The St. Andrew's Day speech itself was a response to growing adverse publicity such as the Herald's front page headline "Revealed: why 100,000 pupils are denied music lessons" (**Herald** 26/2/2003).

The MU's unanimously-accepted motions at this year's Scottish Trades Union Congress looked beyond the report itself. In fact, there are practical suggestions from many arts sectors that could be implemented to give people throughout what is a very wide geographical area guarantees of accessing the treasures and talents available; and to increase support for projects bringing arts to previously neglected or impoverished areas and encouraging creativity therein. The MU called for hard results, not wither-on-the-shelf proposals:

"Congress awaits the published findings of the Cultural Commission, chaired by James Boyle. Congress supports the right of every citizen to access cultural activity wherever it may be delivered throughout Scotland and expects that as a result of the Cultural Commission's report to the Scottish Executive, the necessary infrastructure and support mechanisms will be put in place by the Executive to ensure that this ideal becomes a reality."

The other MU motion adopted pointed to the example of how creativity can be encouraged from the youngest onwards, a scheme that has been up and running since 2003:

"Congress welcomes the Youth Music Initiative, which arose from the publication in 2003 of "What's Going On", the first ever audit of youth music provision in Scotland.

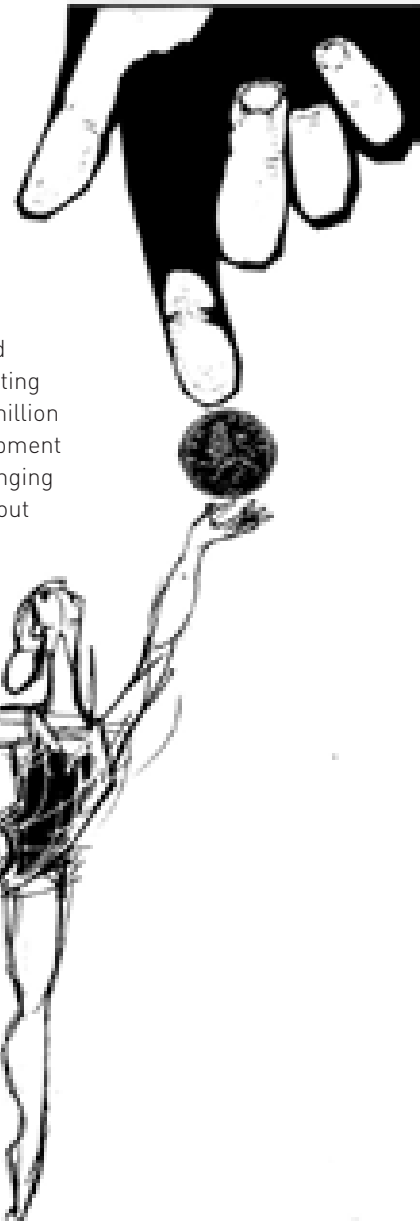
The Scottish Executive agreed to implement most of the findings of the report, co-commissioned by the Musicians' Union, the Scottish Arts Council and Youth Music (UK), resulting in an additional £17.5 million funding for the development of instrumental and singing teaching throughout Scotland's schools for three years from 2003 to 2006."

The motion welcomed its continuation up to 2008, looking forward to it providing

"...even more opportunities for young people in Scotland to develop their skills, access music education as never before and to ensure their life experience will be enhanced as a result. Congress, in applauding this initiative, hopes that the additional funding will be maintained."

The STUC itself has, in recent years, placed the defence of culture even more centrally in its activities and with the participation of Equity, MU, Artists Union and Bectu and other arts unions, pressure can be kept on the Executive to implement essential measures, even in the absence of any 'reports' being adopted. The lesson being that years of intense pressure, led by the then Scottish Organiser Ian Smith, did bear fruit and progress was made towards the organising of youth music, reviewing local authority instrumental and singing provision and the announcement of the additional funding cited in the motion above.

Interrupting the writing of this article, I attended a glorious example of what free instrumental tuition in schools can achieve with the help of an enlightened local authority. Inspired by a teaching and conducting team at a high level of skills, the West Lothian Schools Brass Band celebrated the 30 years since their founding. With several recordings, they have toured Australia, USA and Germany; won the National Youth Brass Band Championship ten times since 1985; the European one,



uniquely, three times and were BBC Radio 2's Youth Brass Band of the Year 1998. The emotional power of their music-making can be overwhelming and a team of several dozen working in expressive co-ordination is an experience neither they nor their listeners can forget. However, free music tuition is still being fought for in a land of uneven provision. Re-establish it! This 'exclusion' is pinpointed by composer Sally Beamish – "In Scotland classical music is reserved for those who can afford it. Gone are the days of free instrumental lessons" (**Scotsman** 26/1/2004). These treasures are for all to enjoy, appealing "directly to humanity as expressed by cherished composers through the ages" (Stephan Lang reflecting Workers Educational Association traditions, **Morning Star** 11/5/2004). Start even earlier: Professor Brian Boyd, at this September's Scottish Association for Music Education annual conference echoed some ideas in the report, calling for the arts to be put at the centre of the pre-school curriculum, a proven way to initiate creativity, develop teamwork, self-discipline and spur on cognitive abilities.

I am glad that talk of a 'super-quango' – a concept so roundly condemned by many in the lead up to the Commission report – has been rejected by Patricia Ferguson. That idea was suspected to be a move to take away arts providing from local authorities (surely they know the local ground best?) – and COSLA weighed in to defend its role in the arts. A double win – many also suspected the proposed abolition of the civic, arms-length bodies, Scottish Screen and the Scottish Arts Council and their replacement by two companies (Culture Scotland and Culture Fund) to be a disguised privatisation (British Rail and Railtrack?). Furthermore, with business representatives and EU bodies sitting on their boards it began to look like a backdoor opening up of our culture to world exploitation – just as schemes in Health and Education are slowly falling in line with the neo-liberal General Agreement on Trade and Services and the EU's Services Directive. Abolish the SAC? With it would have gone decades of experience, fairness, case-history, freedom from much of politicians' meddling. (Given the increasing zest for control of the Blair government it could have been fatal.)

Now that it has survived – for the moment – and campaigned against aspects of the Commission's outlook, uniting with the wider arts community in the process, it should proudly adopt the mantle of a much more vigorous defender of the arts, working with the unions and other bodies and individuals to campaign for the correct funding for a prospering culture. Some of the commission's other ideas were off-beam, too. Its Richard Florida-based 'rise of the creative class' was unnecessary, undermining our self-description as culture workers. And the formation of a National Council for the Creative Individual could be an unnecessary undermining of the work of Trades Unions and other professional bodies in the arts sector.

Never again should we rely on focus groups and think tanks for formulating arts policy. If we were to document our arts achievements it would deserve many handsomely bound encyclopaedic volumes! And beware the sins of omission – Dr Ian Baxter (Associate Director, Heritage Futures Network, Glasgow Caledonian University) come down on the report like a ton of bricks. Indeed bricks are his business: "The Commission has failed to grasp what the historic environment is, or how the public interacts with it, and as a sector we should be apoplectic at the status accorded to heritage in what will be an influential report." And he rightly condemned their

inane suggestion of merging the National Trust with Historic Scotland.

Our position and responsibility here is in no doubt. For example, the MU is the largest organisation for musicians in Europe representing an industry that generates £6 billion annually in the UK economy. The reputation worldwide for Scottish traditional music (for example piping, ensembles, Feisean movement, Celtic Connections, Greentrax CDs) is phenomenal. We are on the cusp of some great developments: the opening of the new home for the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra and Scottish Music Centre under an enlightened municipal umbrella; a developing Music Industry Association; the growth of the Soma Skools (new music technology fairs); the quiet success of Hands Up For Trad; Scottish Opera's rebirth with a new general director Alan Reedijk; Scottish Ballet earning unprecedented plaudits; the development of a University of the Highlands; the permanence of the St. Magnus Festival and its loyal composer, Peter Maxwell Davies (always outspoken in defence of music education); the launch of the aptly titled 'Learning to Survive, Planning to Succeed' music business seminars, a new MU initiative in collaboration with the Scottish Union Learning Fund and the STUC; and composers and innovative bands are earning a tremendous worldwide reputation (here their live concert attendances are up 150 per cent). Meanwhile, proudly independent, receiving not a penny from the public purse, many soldier on for our culture: the unions defending their members; many composers, artists and poets; the College of Piping; this year the Brass Band Association, the Whistlebinkies and other traditional ensembles. And the Poetry Library, Mask and Puppet Centre, Story Telling Centre, the National Youth Choir and Orchestras, the Mela, Museums and Voluntary Arts Network, Greentrax Recordings, Linn and Delphian Records are among many pursuing their craft doggedly.

Now be on guard for increased pressure to liberalise, privatise, implement GATS, the EU Directive on Services, etc. Already touring companies are being brought in (as talent sits idle here) to one star reviews as Conrad Wilson warned (**Herald** 4/6/2005) and which Michael Tumelty described as creating "a nice wee irony for all us socialists – with their claptrap, artless, worthless products, to flood the market here with cheap and vacuous substitutes for quality opera" (**Herald** 4/6/2005). Pundits are again floating politicians' ideas – Ruth Wishart raising again the spectre of 'mergers' (**Herald** 10/10/2005). Still the "arts and classical music are constantly under threat" as Lisa Milne pointed out (**Herald** 13/2/2005) and Michael Boyd's outburst at the treatment of Dundee Rep, "I think it is a bloody scandal, and it's a disgrace that they can't even find the money to guarantee the future of the ensemble" (**Herald** 5/12/2005), still stands as a barometer of the pressure of the debate.

Our Arts can thrive: we don't need commissions to tell us who needs sustenance; the representatives of each sector can beam up the blindingly obvious facts at a moment's notice! In many corners of the report they have set out their ideas and analyses in a forthright way. ■

Eddie McGuire is a composer; Whistlebinkies' flautist; Chair, MU Scotland and Northern Ireland Region; recipient of a British Composers Award 2003 and Creative Scotland Award 2004, chairs the Scottish Campaign against EuroFederalism and has been a delegate to STUC conference

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the death of cool

Robin McAlpine argues that if the Cultural Commission had thought more deeply about the connections between people and the arts, it might have produced a vision which reached beyond styles of management

At best the Cultural Commission was a missed opportunity. Even though there was some scepticism when it was announced, there were enough people who hoped to be proved wrong about it that it could have tapped into some real enthusiasm and thinking. Even when the details of how the Commission be set up and how it would work provoked some dismay, there remained the hope that something of value would come out of it. By the end of the process, there wasn't much hope left. It's not that there is nothing in the Commission's conclusions and recommendations which are of value – if nothing else it made a clear and bold case for a significant increase in the amount of funding that the arts in Scotland should receive from the public purse. It is just a shame that that £100 million call will be lost because, added together, the report doesn't convince.

There has been much talk about what was wrong with the report, and plenty criticism has been levelled. Much of this is merited, but if the Commission hasn't changed many opinions about the importance of the arts in Scotland then it has at least (in a somewhat perverse way) thrown down a gauntlet. If this isn't the vision, then what is? There has been lots of interesting comment and a number of good ideas, but we don't yet seem to be moving at any great speed towards a consensual philosophy. Or at least not one which will traverse the necessary boundaries.

To explore the problem, let's think of the issue in terms of a number of questions. The first of these is probably the easiest – how do you encourage a flourishing arts scene? In the context of Scotland, that isn't difficult to answer. Scotland **has** a flourishing arts scene. In fact, in many regards it is really very encouraging. Glasgow is widely recognised as one of Europe's leading centres of visual arts. Writing is seeing something of a renaissance in Scotland, and that from a pretty high base to begin with. New writing has also given a healthy demeanour to theatre in Scotland and while Hollywood isn't shaking in its boots yet, Scotland's good-to-embarrassing film ratio is one the UK as a whole would happily swap (plus it looks like we will soon have our first dedicated film school). Music in Scotland has seldom looked more diverse or lively, with Franz Ferdinand the toast of the world's music press (and many other genuinely good Scottish bands emerging from their shadows), the traditional scene proving to be vibrant and much to be proud of in our national companies. But it is here that we come across the answer to that simple question – what the arts in Scotland need is more funding. Management structures and eye-catching initiatives be damned; show us the money.

It would be unfair on the Commission not to note that it was fairly clear on that point and certainly few would disagree. But there are

other fundamental questions which simply weren't answered, but which will need to be if we're going to move anything forward. Those are 'what should the arts do for Scotland?' and 'what should be the relationship between the arts and the people of Scotland?'. The first of those questions generates many answers. Yes, the arts has a commercial benefit, yes they provide important blue-sky thinking which influences many aspects of life, yes they help generate identity, yes they are just plain fun, rewarding and good-in-themselves. But those who feel evangelical about the arts need to realise soon that these answers simply don't persuade some of the people that need to be persuaded. Politicians, journalists, opinion-formers; these are classes of people who have to listen to an awful lot of good arguments. If double-think is the ability to hold two opposing ideas in your head at one time, then unthink – the ability to recognise that an argument is correct while it is being made and then disregard it immediately – is an essential survival technique for decision-makers. It is not enough that these arguments are correct if they don't fundamentally resonate. All these benefits accrue right now so why does anything have to be done?

The second question – what is the relationship between the arts and people – is more difficult. It is again worth giving the Commission some credit for at least tackling this question, but it is in its botched conception of it that the whole project really began to unravel. The single idea of 'cultural entitlement' became like a distorting glass – this idea sat between what was taken to be 'the Scottish people' and what was taken to be 'the

arts' and primarily ended up distorting how one looked from the other's vantage point. The idea seemed to be that if people were given an 'entitlement' to 'culture' then they would use it, engaging them directly in the agenda. The fact that the next eight months were spent asking people how this would work is what proved fatal – because the correct answer is that it won't work. It is like providing Victorian orphans with a cod liver oil entitlement; if they don't want it they don't want it. In the case of the arts, if they are intimidated or prejudiced or just not aware, an entitlement will solve nothing.

However, it is in this question that we might find a more persuasive answer. On the one hand, it would have helped to think of 'arts' more in the abstract, not only in terms of

this or that performance or show or 'product'. On the other, it would have helped to have thought of people in the concrete rather than as a mass stereotype. If, rather than a question of how to get 'ordinary, working people' to go to 'the opera' there had been greater consideration of what was being discussed it could have sent the discussion down a very different road.

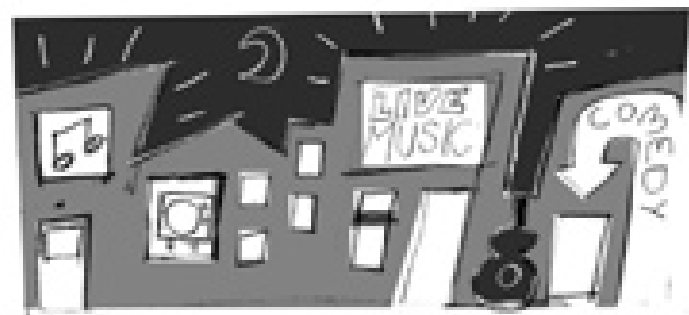
Let's start with people. The ability to visualise 'people' is a recurring failure of parts of the left (leading to the not-incorrect assertion that the 'educated left' in fact often condescends to

or actually despises the 'working class'). The consumerisation of people has become very deep indeed, and we often now see people in terms of consumption. It is often as if, as soon as people stop spending they become invisible. To demonstrate the point, try a thought experiment. Kids still rush outside when the weather becomes either very hot or very cold. Visualise what they do. Now think about days when it is drizzly and the kids are stuck inside. Now visualise what they do. The first image is probably quite vague – run about perhaps, or play with something. The latter is probably very specific and will involve a PlayStation or a DVD player. The same applies to all of us; when someone asks 'what shall we do today' we now tend to think in terms of purchased activity (go to the cinema, ten pin bowling, shopping). Hypercapitalism has distorted **cognito ergo sum** (I think therefore I am) into **consumo ergo sum** (I buy therefore I am).

But this is a lie. The sudden upturn in academic interest in 'happiness' tells us much, both because it is happening and because of what it is discovering. In fact, we are not one bit happier because of our increased spending power and in fact are in many cases very much unhappier. Of course, the problem of constantly-increasing options with no moral, ethical or aesthetic framework in which to choose between them (anomie) was identified by French sociologist Emile Durkheim in the 19th Century, so there is little reason to be surprised. Because, while things **can** make us happy, they can only do so by helping us towards something more fundamental that we enjoy (it isn't the TV that people like, it is what is on the TV).

This is what our caricature of 'the people' misses. People use things to bring them closer to more fundamental emotions – which is how we need to look at people if we are going to get a real answer to our question. And, conveniently, is also how we need to look at the arts. The arts are about self expression in their creation, but they are also about self expression in their

reception. When a teenager listens to American rapper Kanye West singing Gold Digger, they do it because



it makes them want to move, to jump up. All those women who read Brigit Jones' Diary enjoyed it because it told them something about themselves or about their world. The response to Saving Private Ryan was about the sudden understanding of the horror of war. All of these responses were about embracing the projection of something fundamental in the human psyche (spirit/nature/experience – pick your word). That is what the arts are about.

So let's ask the question again; what should be the relationship between the people of Scotland and the arts? It should be like the relationship between them and themselves; a lifelong dialogue that neither side will ever walk away from. This might sound vague or esoteric, but it is anything but. Let me provide a direct analogy that a Scottish Left Review reader will hopefully recognise; cool is to self expression what rich is to money and poor is to money what low self esteem is to self expression. It is helpful to think of arts in the abstract because, in the short term at least, it doesn't really matter what the specific artworks are. What is important is that we help people to have the self-confidence to find self expression either in the creation or the consumption of art. Cool is a helpful concept here, containing as it does at least two useful elements; expression and knowledge. Those we consider cool (that is, really cool as opposed to fashionable) are so because they wear – listen to, read, watch, do – things they **really** like as opposed to things they are sold. It is because they seem to the rest to be doing 'their own thing' that they are admired. But it is not enough to just 'do your own thing'; you need some style or taste if you are to be considered cool. What we really mean by these things is knowledge; knowing something about the history and elements of design, something about the structure and history of music, something about the construction of language.

What would happen if there was a genuine redistribution of self expression? That is to say, if everyone had the confidence to do their own thing and the knowledge to find out what that was, where would we be? Well, for one thing there would be an awful lot of people with a much deeper linking for themselves. Many aspects of alienation and anomie would be tackled because your life would be shaped by **your** interest and not by someone else's and because you would be making your own choices and not desperately selecting from other people's. We could reasonably expect many social changes from it – can we imagine the same level of crime, intolerance, ignorance, inequality in such a world? Actually, let's not bother asking because there is centuries-worth of empirical evidence about what happens when people are happy, content, fulfilled. This, surely, is the logical extension of left thinking; strive for the end of poverty and strive for the end of 'self repression'. Aim for a world in which everyone is cool, which is to say that no-one is. Work towards the death of cool.

What does this mean in practice? Well, it means that we have to help people to be able to make these self discoveries, and that means education. There simply isn't space here to draw out a full programme of action from these suggestions, but let me propose a few. Every school pupil would be taken to a cultural event every week. Not to indoctrinate them but to inform them. So yes they ought to get to an opera, but also to a comedy club. A gallery and a night club. Read a book and watch a movie. The variety should be so great that the school kids wouldn't find any of it strange or intimidating and in time they would discover what it is that they really enjoy and appreciate

(and think what the volume of young patrons would do for the arts sector). But the experience is not enough, because without some knowledge much of it would be difficult to get the most from. We need to ease back from the functionalism of our education system and think about more important issues. I left school able to do differential calculus but not really knowing the difference between Picasso and Reubens. I did study music, and am regularly surprised to discover that even highly educated people have barely the sketchiest knowledge of even the broad sweep of musical history (it seems to run 'five centuries of classical and then there was Elvis'). If we started by teaching

children how to be people and **then** how to be employees, we might have less need of ASBOs.

We are caught in orbit around culture policy; there is too much awareness of its general value to give up and go crashing into the ground but there simply isn't enough enthusiasm to break the orbit and go somewhere else. The Culture Commission was a missed opportunity, but it isn't the end of the story. ■

Robin McAlpine is Editor of the Scottish Left Review and author of No Idea – control, liberation and the social imagination



sung out to dry

Robert Crowe was a member of the Scottish Opera Chorus which was abolished as a cost-saving measure. Here he explains his anger.

I do not have the ability with words like some Scottish politicians and bend the truth the way they do. I do not try to be a star but I have always worked hard at everything I have done in life whatever job I have undertaken. The past two years have sadly left me strongly disillusioned with Scottish politics.

The last Saturday evening of Scottish Opera's Fidelio with the full time chorus left me in tears. I looked out at a sea of people standing and cheering for a minimum of ten minutes. It had been the same routine to some extent for the final three weeks. My partner at the start of the final act had removed her wig for the first time since returning to work after her cancer treatment which she had born so bravely. She had lost a breast but had fought back so she was again able to sing. I stood there myself belting it out for the whole night thinking how I had fought my way back to health after a triple heart bypass. There was also a girl loosing her sight but every night while she was able she has

stood up doing the same giving her all to the audience. Every member of that chorus gave everything. The Daily Record stated in the very beginning that opera was not for the common man.

The Daily Record stated that opera was not for the common man. Well we have stood in front of the theatres and met the people in our audiences – welders, miners, builders, normal folk who love opera.

I challenge that statement – you have no idea what you are taking about. We have stood in front of the theatres and met the people in our audiences – welders, miners, builders, normal folk who love opera.

We have fought long and hard for our jobs for a period of two years but they have now gone. We have joined many other Scottish folk who have been paid off over the past years of this so-called workers' government. Words are cheap, but the sort of publicity that pored out of Scottish Opera has made Alistair Campbell look like an apprentice. Opera is about singing; it always has been and always will be. The Arts Council, the past Chairman of the Board and Sandy Orr had all discussed getting rid of the chorus four years before it happened. The planning for this was put into

place two years ago. By who? Sir Richard Armstrong and Ms Jenny Slack who where both to blame for the over extravagant productions chosen by the house. They allowed the budget overrun in design and performance. Sir Richard has been kept on as a consultant over the next two years. Bullshit! He is doing 80 per cent of the conducting work and is actively casting the next operas with Ms Jenny Slack . They are both responsible. Her final kick in the face to the members of the chorus was the advertisement for a new chorus master two weeks after the last one member of the chorus was out of the door. Come on; Bill Taylor as a QC you should no better than to allow that!

Singing in the rain for the Scottish Parliament? We tried but the arts minister and Jack went round the back way. Scottish politicians – SNP and many others – made the most of photo opportunities with the chorus. It was nice to get pictures in the paper but why could we not get anything done in the Scottish Parliament? Because the deal had already been done by Richard Armstrong, the board of Scottish Opera and Dear Old Jack. The parliamentary petition set up by Equity was a utter waste of time. Strike one. The announcement before the start of La Boheme in the Festival Theatre that the chorus was going to be paid off, the lack of a full effective response there and then. Strike two. The announcement that a deal had been reached by our union Equity and the management of Scottish Opera after we returned from summer holidays. News that 20 jobs would be saved effectively broke the unity of the chorus. Strike three.

The orchestra had to be retained. Why? To appease Sir Richard Armstrong, that's why. You can drill an orchestra into shape in a week or two; they only read off pages of music. Singers have to memorise parts, learn moves, become actors. So why has Scottish Opera been paid nearly £2 million to keep an orchestra in full time employment for the next year when they are only employed for about three months' work and nearly all of them have teaching jobs as well. Most must be making £35,000 plus. Well best of luck to them. Eighty-eight people lost jobs at Scottish Opera. I understand that the orchestra is only 56 strong. That leaves 125 people in the building, or somewhere near that figure. All you are running at present is opera for youth, a quartet and an orchestra.

It is a National Disgrace what has happened to this company and the ones who are guilty have not taken the blame. To the people of Scotland who supported us we say thank you. To those politicians who attempted to fight our corner we say thank you. To the management of Scottish Opera I hope the guilt that you have to bare stays with you the rest of your lives. To the tax inspector who was told to investigate my Scottish Opera earnings – I only earned £87.00 last week so you will not be getting any back. ■

Robert W.Crowe, tenor, is now a freelance opera singer and sings with Scotland's Classical Three Tenor group called R3 Tenors, soon to be singing in the USA. www.r3tenors.co.uk

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a desperate lack of vision

Gerry Mooney explores the Scottish Executive's 2005 Legislative Programme

In early September 2005 First Minister Jack McConnell unveiled the Scottish Executive's legislative programme for the remaining 19 months of this the second Scottish Parliament since devolution in 1999. Twenty new Bills were promised covering a diverse range of economic, cultural, social and environmental matters, from improvements in animal health and welfare legislation, changes to planning and adoption regulations through to new laws on personal bankruptcy, measures aimed at speeding up the passage of transport infrastructure bills and already controversial amendments to the planning process which do not allow for a third party right of appeal. While many of these are technical or procedural pieces of legislation, they are all presented as part of a wider package of reforms contributing to the Executive's oft-repeated vision of 'modern' policies for a 'modern' Scotland. Cutting through this 'tartanised' Blairite language, however, there are some proposals that many readers of the **Scottish Left Review** would welcome (vague though they remain) including a commitment to improving food in schools, schools based health promotion, the creation of a Scottish Human Rights Commission and improving the rights of crofters.

It comes as little surprise, however, that with many of these proposals, behind the simplistic rhetoric more important issues and questions go unanswered: in promoting good food in schools (though the absence of any commitment to universal free school meals remains a notable omission) will the Executive be prepared to challenge several major companies by requiring that fizzy drinks machines are removed, the spread of which in recent times has largely been fuelled by PFI/PPP contracts? Elsewhere, in relation to human rights for instance, already there are well grounded fears that the proposed new body will lack any substantive powers.

Compared with some previous legislative programmes, perhaps this one did not receive that much attention from the Scottish media but the coverage which did emerge focused primarily on two main planks of McConnell's agenda; public order/criminal justice and cuts in business rates. It is the proposed legislation for these two areas that betray the overarching visions of the Scottish Executive and lay bare their neo-liberal, right wing and populist pedigrees. Not surprisingly business organisations were beside themselves with joy that Christmas had come early with the unexpected announcement that Scottish business rates would be cut by around 10 per cent, at a cost of more than £200m per year. Because valuations of businesses in Scotland are lower than in England, this has been heralded as giving Scottish companies a major competitive tax advantage. But who would pay for this? McConnell and his colleagues, in particular Finance Minister Tom McCabe, trumpeted 'cost and efficiency savings' as enabling the Executive to fund these cuts, but there are other indications that already hard pressed, and often poorly paid,

public service workers will be expected to pay in some way for this largesse for business. As McConnell put it:

'...it is time to secure greater competitive advantage for Scotland. There is a limit to how long public expenditure can continue growing. These past eight years have seen incredible increases in public investment. And rightly so. But the balance in Scotland's economy now needs to make a shift. Improving public sector efficiency has had a significant part to play in the overall improvement in Scotland's relative productivity'.

(Jack McConnell Legislative Programme, September 6, 2005, available at www.scotland.gov.uk)

Since 1997 'cost' and/or 'efficiency' 'savings' have come to represent New Labour speak for cuts in real pay, a decline in hard fought working conditions for many workers frequently through ill-conceived PPP/PFI schemes which have come to be an insidious disease affecting the public sector in Scotland. If tax cuts for the private sector were not enough, in other ways the new programme laid out by McConnell also promises much for business. It talks of 'growing the economy' as the 'top priority' facing the Executive, providing 'Scotland' with a competitive 'edge' through improvements in productivity and cost effectiveness. In many respects there is little that is new in all of this, following as it does down a by now well-trodden path that speaks of a 'revitalised' Scottish economy or of a 'renewed' 'entrepreneurial' Scotland.

The priority given to the 'needs' and demands of Scotland's business community takes precedence here above all other proposals. The only other areas of concern that comes close are law enforcement and public order and again plans for legislation in this field highlights in important ways how the Scottish Executive is increasingly in tune with New Labour in England and Wales in relation to criminal justice. So-called 'bail bandits' represent a key group to be targeted in the near future, with the Executive promising that those accused of serious crimes will find it harder to get bail while those who 'jump' bail while find themselves facing tougher and harsher penalties.

These are presented as representing yet another phase in the 'renewal and modernisation' of the Scottish criminal justice system which already in the recent past has involved the growing use of Anti Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs), community wardens, parenting orders, assorted public order measures and which will be further reinforced by a Police, Public Order and Criminal Justice bill that

aims to improve police 'effectiveness' and improve community safety. Football banning orders, mandatory drug testing for those arrested on drug related crimes, harsher penalties for the possession of a knife, more effective forms of fine collection and enforcement are all promised. And if this is not enough,

The priority given to the 'needs' and demands of Scotland's business community takes precedence here above all other proposals

'disrespect for the rules of our society' among young people will be tackled by a 'modernised' Children's Hearing System that 'will require agencies to work together and parents to face up to their responsibilities'. However, there is an even harsher message conveyed here which shows that youth justice has risen to dominate the Executive's thinking in relation to criminal justice:

'By challenging offending behaviour and addressing the needs of each young person, we help them to help themselves. But, for the small core of prolific and persistent youngsters who undermine themselves and their communities, we will meet persistence with persistence'.

(Ibid)

The populist, right wing rhetoric used here could almost come straight from The Daily Mail, or perhaps more correctly The Scottish Daily Mail. At the time when McConnell was making his announcement to the Holyrood Parliament, Blair was also publicising the key elements of New Labour's 'respect agenda' in England. Both share the familiar themes and arguments that have come to characterise many of the Governments' (in both London and Edinburgh) public rhetoric about crime and disorder, and once again an effort is made to distinguish and differentiate between the law abiding majority, the 'sometimes' or 'nearly' criminal and, in the language of McConnell above, the 'small core of prolific and persistent' unruly offenders. In the promise to clampdown on offending and anti-social behaviour through a new regime of harsher penalties, the Scottish Executive has taken their 'toughness' stance to a new level. In all of this more and more of Scotland's young people come to be criminalised or fall under the seemingly ever widening criminal and youth justice apparatus. It is evident that McConnell sees this programme as representing a new stage in the devolution process, a process that he sees as already 'working for Scotland'. As he put it in his statement to Parliament:

'Devolution is no longer in its infancy. It is time to enter a new phase. Instead of this place being somewhere that we find Scottish solutions to Scottish problems. This place should be about finding Scottish success through Scottish ambition'.

(Ibid)

McConnell's programme is presented as representing above all a 'vision for Scotland – the best small country in the world'. However, despite reference to some rather fuzzy idea of 'Scottish ambition' here, it is instead the lack of ambition that is only too evident in this agenda which, together with the general paucity of ideas, would on their own be a very sad state of affairs were it not for the uncritical genuflection to populist sentiment and the clamour to succour to business. The 'Scotland' of today that is represented by the Scottish Executive is a Scotland that is far removed from the day-to-day realities that face tens

of thousands of people across the length and breadth of the country. The Scotland of New Labour is a world apart from the Scotland in which there is a general sense that public services have been and are being eroded, that the health service is less and less 'safe' in New Labour's hands, that secure, meaningful employment is becoming more uncertain, that further and higher education is a route to little more than mundane employment and that the gulf between rich and poor in Scottish society is increasing at an alarming rate. While the Executive makes great play of the fall in child poverty since 1997, from one in three to one in four of Scottish children, at the same time it appears blind, to put it mildly, to other evidence upon evidence, that show income inequalities as continuing to rise and, only one month after the Executive's new legislative programme was announced, new figures published by the General Register Office

for Scotland showing that the divide in standards of health between people in the poorest and most affluent areas had risen over the past decade. These statistics represent yet another in a very long line of statistics that show in the starkest terms possible, the effect that poverty and inequality have on a person's health. They also demonstrate, against claims to the opposite that class background remains the single most important factor that accounts for a person's health and overall quality of life.

In challenging the Executive's legislative agenda we are challenging something much more important and that is the vision of the Scotland that is being offered. Yes, there is some recognition of Scotland as an unequal place, though this is both ever present though rarely spoken in McConnell's speech, apart that is from vague references to providing more 'opportunities'. The Scotland of the future that is imagined in all of this is a desperate place, where ambition, education, health and social justice are all reduced to the role of enhancing competitiveness and where even the remotest hint of 'stepping out of line', especially if you

are young, brings with it the threat of harsh sanctions. Surely, surely another Scotland is possible. ■

The Scotland of the future that is imagined in all of this is a desperate place, where ambition, education, health and social justice are all reduced to the role of enhancing competitiveness and where even the remotest hint of 'stepping out of line', especially if you are young, brings with it the threat of harsh sanctions

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after the party

Judith Robertson assesses how far forward the G8 deal on poverty has taken us

Nearly a quarter of a million people took to the streets of Edinburgh on 2 July. They demanded an end to the injustice of global poverty. Never before has poverty been pushed so high on the global political agenda, and never before has a G8 summit made such sizeable commitments to increase aid and reduce debt. But while the Make Poverty History campaign secured significant progress in July, much remains to be achieved.

The aid increase of \$48 billion announced at the Gleneagles summit is not all it seems. It does represent a step in the right direction, but in reality as little as \$16bn of this amount is genuinely 'new' money; the rest is a re-announcement of pledges already made. To put the deal in perspective, at present a child dies every three seconds as a result of poverty; on the basis of the G8 deal, by 2010 a child will die every three and a half seconds as a result of poverty. The Millennium Development Goals aim to halve global poverty by 2015. However, the MDGs will not be met on current projections. It would take \$60bn of new money in 2006 to get the MDGs back on track, but the G8 deal will provide only \$4bn next year.

Make Poverty History also wanted action to improve the quality and effectiveness of aid. However, the G8 deal offered no progress in this area. Too much aid comes with strings attached, with poor countries forced to open their markets, cut vital public spending, and privatise basic services in order to receive aid and debt relief from the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. Often, bilateral aid from rich countries (that is, aid provided directly from one government to another) is made conditional on the developing country buying goods or services from the donor country, which can undermine the power of developing countries to run their affairs efficiently and look after their own best interests. There has been no progress towards ensuring aid is targeted at those who need it most, rather than used to further the economic or foreign policy objectives of rich donor countries. The commitment made at the G8 to provide universal treatment for HIV/AIDS by 2010 and to replenish the Global Fund to fight AIDS, TB and Malaria is to be welcomed. There is no specific financial commitment yet, however, and we wait to see if money will follow these welcome promises. Rich countries must honour their promise to commit 0.7 per cent of their Gross National Income for development aid. Under the G8 deal, by 2010, donor governments will be dedicating on average only 0.36 per cent GNI, far short of what is needed to meet the modest aims of the MDGs, much less eradicate poverty.

Repayment of debt owed to the international community prevents many poor countries from meeting the basic health and education needs of their own people, and is a major barrier to meeting internationally agreed targets for reducing poverty. Under the G8 deal, eligible countries would cease making any payments on debts owed to the World Bank, the African Development Bank and the IMF as soon as the deal is implemented, and the actual stock of their debts would, over time, be reduced to zero. This deal applies to 18 countries in the first instance, though in the medium term it could be extended to 38; however, Make Poverty History and others estimate that over 60 countries need total debt cancellation if they are to meet the Millennium Development Goals. The G8 deal is worth about

\$17bn at Net Present Value, which is equivalent to \$40bn over the next forty years. Most of the debt in question is owed to the World Bank, which will finance the write-off by cutting the aid allowances to eligible countries. Financing debt cancellation through aid budgets in this way will reduce the net benefit of the deal for developing countries. However, other countries that receive aid from the World Bank but are not heavily indebted will also be eligible for some of the redistributed aid money. It is estimated that the deal will deliver just over 10 per cent of the debt relief required to enable significant progress towards the MDGs. However, the fact that it establishes the **principle** of 100 per cent debt cancellation is an important step forward.

In the vast majority of cases, countries only become eligible for debt relief if they have graduated from the 'Heavily Indebted Poor Countries' (HIPC) programme, which involves adopting economic policies prescribed by the IMF and World Bank. These are the very policies that underpin the global system of unfair trade, perpetuating injustice and hardship. The G8 debt deal does not add any **new** conditions, but countries will only be eligible for the debt write-off if they have **already** implemented the existing conditions of the HIPC framework. In this sense, the G8 debt deal could actually make HIPC a more powerful instrument of trade injustice. This deal was partly ratified at the World Bank and International Monetary Fund annual meetings on September 24 and 25th 2005 in New York which means that 18 countries will be eligible with a possible further 30 countries in the future. But they are all still subject to stringent conditions and parts of the deal may not be finalised until July next year.

Let's look at a case study. The crisis in Niger pushed one of the world's poorest countries into the global spotlight in the weeks following the G8 summit. Many factors have contributed to the current situation, which resulted in 2.65 million people in urgent need of food aid. Drought and locusts have destroyed harvests and livestock, the main source of income and food for many of the poorest people. But a legacy of economic policies inspired by the IMF and World Bank have also played a significant part in entrenching poverty in Niger, creating the high levels of vulnerability that make it harder for poor people to cope with environmental or social crises when they occur. Over the last twenty years, Niger has fully complied with economic reforms supported by Structural Adjustment loans and advice from the IMF. However, this process of liberalisation has failed to help Niger increase its wealth. Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has declined, as has government revenue as a share of GDP, depriving the government of money to pay for basic services. Niger has participated in the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) programme and, as part of the agreement with the IMF that secured its debt cancellation, the government proposed its intention to impose VAT on food. It needed to do this to compensate for falling revenues, even though VAT is a tax that hits poor people disproportionately. After massive protests the proposal was eventually withdrawn. However, the IMF's advice has served people living in poverty in Niger a double injustice by financing a liberalisation programme that reduced the government's capacity to raise revenue for basic public services, and then by attaching conditions to debt relief that prompted the government to increase taxes.

As the current food crisis in the region demonstrates, those in countries with very fragile economies, such as Niger, are least equipped to withstand environmental calamities. At Gleneagles the G8 leaders affirmed the right of developing countries to decide their own economic policies. In theory, developing countries already have some power to decide the extent and pace of their own economic reforms by applying 'Special and Differential Treatment' to strategically important sectors in order to promote development. However, in practice, developing countries find it hard to use these existing provisions and come under intense pressure to liberalise their economies, even though there is mounting evidence that rapid and indiscriminate liberalisation is entrenching and intensifying poverty in many parts of the world, harming the environment, and eroding labour standards. The issue of trade justice is intrinsically linked to the issues of aid and debt relief because the World Bank and International Monetary Fund - which are largely controlled by the G8 countries - insist that poor countries open up their markets, cut vital public spending and privatise basic services as a condition of receiving debt relief and aid.

Yet even when poor countries follow the one-size-fits-nobody economic prescriptions of the IMF and World Bank, they can't compete on a level playing field with the EU and USA, who protect their own economies from the harsh side-effects of liberalisation by subsidising their agricultural industries. This not only creates unfair competition; it fuels the production of surpluses that are then dumped on world markets, forcing down world prices for basic goods such as sugar, cotton and rice. As 95 per cent of people in developing countries depend on agriculture for their livelihoods, subsidised exports from rich countries have a devastating impact on the ability of people living in poverty to earn a living. Progress towards ending EU and US export subsidies, already declared illegal by the

World Trade Organisation, has been sluggish. The G8 failed to announce any date by which all export subsidies will be phased out, reputedly because the European Commission put stumbling blocks in the way of a deal. Crucial trade negotiations will take place at the World Trade Organisation meeting in Hong Kong in December to attempt to conclude the 'Doha Development Round'. At Gleneagles the G8 leaders urged greater urgency in the vital advance negotiations. However, the language used in the G8 communiqué implies that the G8 may be moving away from previous commitments to prioritise outcomes for poverty reduction and towards outcomes that increase liberalisation and reciprocal market access.

Although Scotland is no longer in the international spotlight, the Make Poverty History campaign continues to the end of 2005. White Band Day 2 on 10 September 2005 reminded world leaders, meeting at the UN Summit in New York, that the world is still watching and waiting for them to make poverty history. White Band Day 3 on 10 December, in advance of a crucial meeting of the World Trade Organisation (the body that decides the rules governing international trade), is another key moment for campaigners to demand trade justice. MPH campaigners are right now debating how to carry the campaign forward to the future. There is still much that we can do throughout 2005 by lobbying politicians, holding local events and joining national actions. On November 25 in Edinburgh Kumi Naidoo from the Global Call to Action Against Poverty (MPH's global umbrella organisation) will speak about the campaign - about the importance of the WTO, the outcomes of the G8 and the importance of keeping up the pressure. The meeting is in St Augustine's, George IV Bridge at 5.30pm. Be there and join the debate. ■

To find out what YOU can do to Make Poverty History, log on to www.makepovertyhistory.org

Judith Robertson is Head of Oxfam in Scotland



Campaigning for the return of rail to the public sector

Campaigning to keep Caledonian MacBrayne's lifeline ferry services in public hands

Let's put the public back in public transport

Bob Crow, General Secretary

Tony Donaghey, President

illuminating whitehall's disinterest

Jim and Margaret Cuthbert describe how without the Freedom of Information Act they would never have discovered serious mistakes in how Scottish public spending is assessed

As this article is being written, Scottish political headlines are dominated by an event which has been a direct consequence of the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), namely, the resignation of David McLetchie as leader of the Scottish Conservatives. Mr. McLetchie's fate, as is well known, was sealed by the release of his taxi expenses – a release of information which would not have occurred without the Act. It would be wrong, however, (and indeed, dangerous), to judge the FOIA purely by its potential for delivering the occasional high ranking political scalp. What we want to discuss in this paper is another, much less glamorous, application of the FOIA, but one which nevertheless gives us some important insights into how devolution is actually working, and, in particular, how it is not being taken sufficiently seriously in Whitehall.

Just as the McLetchie episode was reaching its media peak, it so happened that we published in a specialist economic commentary a critique of the Treasury's figures on public expenditure in the different countries and regions of the UK ("A Constructive Critique of the Treasury's Country and Regional Analysis of Public Expenditure, Fraser of Allander Quarterly Economic Commentary, October 2005). Each year the Treasury produces the Public Expenditure Statistical Analyses (PESA), containing details of 'identifiable expenditure' in each part of the UK. Identifiable expenditure is that which can be attributed as being for the benefit of specific areas. These are the figures which underpin the ongoing political debate about whether Scotland is subsidised by the rest of the UK, and they are also used extensively in serious academic research. These figures carry the full weight both of being produced by the Treasury, and being classified as 'national statistics'; as a result, they are universally regarded as a unique and unimpeachable source. Until the FOIA came into effect, there was absolutely no way of penetrating below the aggregate figures published by the Treasury to discover just what devils might be lurking in the detail. As an illustration of this last point, consider the following quotation from a paper by the respected economist Professor David Heald, given at an international conference: "The Treasury takes a proprietary view of its database and denies access to this even to the pre-devolution territorial departments and the post-devolution Executives". This quotation in itself says volumes about the Treasury's attitude to the peripheral (from their point of view) parts of the UK.

The importance of the FOIA is that we were able to use the Act to obtain, for the first time, the detailed database which underlies the Treasury's published public expenditure statistics. Among other things, this database contains information on the detailed sub-programme classification of expenditure; to give an

indication of how detailed this is, there are almost 800 different sub-programme codes in the database. Another important Treasury exercise is also carried out at sub-programme level and this is the production of the Treasury Funding Statement for the devolved administrations, published biennially, which shows, for each sub-programme in each Whitehall department, whether the corresponding function is devolved or reserved. By cross relating these two exercises we attempted to see whether the description in PESA of how the money is spent is consistent with the description in the Treasury Funding Statement of whether the corresponding functions are reserved or devolved. The answers were illuminating.

First of all, we found a lot of mistakes in the data. For example, there was an inconsistency in the definition of identifiable expenditure between Scotland and England; the effect is that expenditure on functions like prisons, court services and nature conservation is regarded as 'non-identifiable' in England, but expenditure on the same services in Scotland is identifiable. The amounts of expenditure involved here are very large – at least £4.4 billion of expenditure in England was excluded from the identifiable expenditure base, while the corresponding expenditure in Scotland was included as identifiable. This directly contradicts the statement made by the Treasury when publishing their figures that "figures for expenditure per head in the regions of England and the countries of the UK are therefore directly comparable". There were other mistakes as well. To give some examples:

- There are a number of cases where expenditure is wrongly attributed in PESA. The examples we have picked up include (i) where the Department of Works and Pensions identified wrongly that it had spent £57 million of its European expenditure on Scotland, even when this is a devolved function and the relevant expenditure was already included in the Scottish Executive spend: (ii) export promotion and inward investment, where expenditure specifically for the benefit of England is recorded as being for the benefit of all parts of Britain: and (iii) tourism, where again expenditure specifically for England is recorded as being spent on behalf of all parts of Britain.
- All expenditure in Scotland on national museums, art galleries and libraries is regarded as identifiable to Scotland even though some of the users of these services will be resident elsewhere in the UK. However, for similar institutions in England, some of the users will come from Scotland and an element of expenditure is identified to Scotland for such users. This therefore represents another asymmetry between Scotland and England in the definition

of identifiable expenditure (though the practical effects of this particular error will be fairly small).

- Even the description of some of the purely Scottish data is misleading; the whole of expenditure on Scottish Enterprise is attributed to the 'employment' function, while Highlands and Islands Enterprise expenditure is attributed to 'enterprise'. This would seriously distort any study of comparative expenditure on enterprise and employment in Scotland.

Many of these specific errors are symptomatic of a more general problem, namely that the Treasury has failed to adequately cross relate the two exercises leading respectively to PESA and the Treasury Funding Statement. Information on reserved/devolved status is not recorded in the PESA database and, in many cases, it is not possible even to match up the sub-programme descriptors between the two exercises.

How much does all this matter? The answer is a lot. First of all, these Treasury figures have a major effect on the political debate in Scotland. Readers will be familiar with the annual circus, each time the Scottish Executive publishes its Government Expenditure and Revenue in Scotland (GERS) report, where Unionist politicians line up to criticise Scotland for its high level of general government expenditure and its claimed fiscal deficit. But on the expenditure side, the GERS report is heavily based on input data from the Treasury PESA exercise. Correcting the errors we have identified in PESA has the effect of reducing the GERS estimate of general government in Scotland by about £550million per annum: and even then, we are not confident that we have identified all of the errors in PESA. We are not saying that all that needs to be done to GERS to make it acceptable is to make these corrections – we have other worries about GERS, both in relation to data and philosophy. But a distortion of GERS

expenditure by £550 million is certainly very material. Secondly, the fact that the Treasury does not record in its PESA database the reserved/devolved status of sub-programmes means that the government is incapable of producing some of the most basic and important analyses about the progress of devolution. To determine whether devolution is indeed having an effect on comparative spending patterns between the different parts of the UK, it is natural to ask whether expenditure trends on devolved services are varying, say, between Scotland and England. But the Treasury has not seen fit to collect or to record in the PESA database the basic information to construct an estimate for England of expenditure on services which are devolved in Scotland.

Furthermore, we have identified important examples where the way in which Whitehall departments are delivering their services is inconsistent with the actual scope of their responsibilities under devolution. This means that Scotland will tend to lose out if, as seems often to be the case, a Whitehall department with reserved (that is, whole UK) responsibilities is behaving in

certain respects as if it were responsible for delivering services primarily for England. If the PESA and Treasury Funding Statement exercises were properly integrated, this would force Whitehall departments to think through their responsibilities much more carefully, with a consequent likely improvement in the quality of actual service delivery.

Overall, the conclusion we come to is that both the Treasury and many Whitehall departments do not take devolution seriously. The Treasury do not take it seriously enough to produce accurate PESA data – even though this data is known to be key for the ongoing debate about relative levels of public expenditure. They do not take it seriously enough to include in their database the information which would enable them to produce basic analyses of expenditure on devolved services in England. And neither the Treasury nor several Whitehall departments take it seriously enough to ensure that the way they deliver services is consistent with their actual responsibilities.

The future value of Freedom of Information is likely to stem largely from patient plodding through the detail rather than in uncovering 'killer memos'. Unrestricted access to detail is therefore vital if the Act is not going to be neutered

Why this is the case is not clear. Certainly, the Prime Minister's infamous 'parish council' quip may have set a very unfortunate tone. And a further contributory factor must have been the virtual castration of the Scotland Office and the demotion of the post of Secretary of State for Scotland to a part time occupation for the Transport Secretary. Given that around one third of public expenditure in Scotland is on functions which are still reserved, Whitehall departments need to raise their game considerably. To achieve this, Scotland's Westminster MPs need to adopt a much more pro-active role with Whitehall, and Scotland also needs an active full time representative of its interests in Cabinet.

We think access to the PESA database is a very good example illustrating the importance of the FOIA. Coincidentally, on 2 November, just after Mr. McLetchie's resignation, there was a debate in the Scottish Parliament about the FOIA. Under the rather self congratulatory veneer, it

was not difficult to discern the stirring of reaction. After all, it should never be forgotten that the Irish Freedom of Information legislation was significantly weakened after embarrassing details were revealed under the original version about Bertie Ahern's expenses. It would be most unfortunate if, for whatever reason, our FOIA was modified to limit the extent to which it is possible to access the level of detail which brought McLetchie down, or indeed, which we used in our work on the Treasury database. The Civil Service, as can readily be seen, is already modifying its behaviour so that incautiously phrased minutes or emails are very unlikely to appear in the future. This means that the future value of the FOIA is likely to stem largely from patient plodding through the detail which reveals how processes actually work, rather than through uncovering 'killer memos'. Unrestricted access to detail is therefore vital if the FOIA is not going to be neutered. If the McLetchie affair does indeed lead to a restriction on the availability of detail, then it could indeed be said that McLetchie's taxi had taken us up a very unfortunate blind alley. ■

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

are we really radical?

In his new book, Gregor Gall assesses the statistical evidence for Scotland being inherently to the left of the UK. Here he argues that there is evidence of this, but that the picture is not a simple one

From the days of 'Red Clydeside' and the 'little Moscows' in the Fife coalfields at the beginning of the twentieth century, Scotland and its people have long had a reputation for radicalism. In the battle against Thatcherism, such left-of-centre political values increasingly became seen to be part of what it meant to be 'Scottish'. Indeed, 'Scottishness' became shorthand for a rejection of so-called 'alien' and 'English' politics of greed and individualism. But is there really much substance to this rose-tinted view we have of ourselves? The thesis of **The Political Economy of Scotland: Red Scotland? Radical Scotland?** is that over the last thirty years there is ample evidence of a significant 'red thread' running through the attitudes and behaviour of the populace in Scotland.

What makes this evidence seem to be so much more significant than might otherwise be the case is that Scots view this evidence, and themselves, predominantly through a lens of a distinct type of Scottish national identity. It is one imbued with social democratic values of restricting the operation of the 'free market' and the power of employers through collectivism, solidarity and the public provision of services like housing, health and education. Indeed, the evidence of radicalism has become part and parcel of that dominant social democratic Scottish national identity.

The evidence for the population of Scotland being more radical than the population of England or the rest of Britain is found amongst consecutive surveys on social attitudes. First, people in Scotland have shown around ten percentage points more support for greater workers' rights over, for example, legal minimum wages, employment protection, trade union immunities and nationalisation, than people in England or the rest of Britain have on done these issues. On wider social issues like reducing unemployment, wealth redistribution, taxation and increasing social provision, people in Scotland have shown similarly greater levels of support for these than those in England or the rest of Britain have done. For example, in 1997 76 per cent of people in Scotland agreed that the British government should sign the Social Chapter to extend workers' rights while only 67 per cent did so in England. And in 2002, 50 per cent of people in Scotland believed the British government should carry out wealth redistribution. The corresponding figure for people in England was 38 per cent.

Second, people in Scotland, across social classes, more often identify themselves as 'working class' than people

in England do. For example, in Scotland the percentage of people perceiving themselves as 'working class' increased from 68 per cent to 72 per cent between 1974 and 1992 while in England the percentage of people identifying themselves as working class fell from 65 per cent to 57 per cent over the same period. This resulted from a positive identification with what it meant to be 'working class' in Scotland – the notion of a compassionate community of people standing out together against Thatcherism. In England, Thatcherism held more sway and eroded the pride in being working class.

Third, this chimes with a greater preponderance of people in Scotland, who identify themselves as 'working class', voting Labour than those who identify themselves as 'working class' in England. In 1974, 84 per cent of 'working class' Scots voted Labour, rising to 87 per cent in 1992. In England, the corresponding figures were 78 per cent and 78 per cent. As

people increasingly identified themselves as 'working class', the logical conclusion was to vote for the Labour as the perceived party of the working class. Fourth, and highlighting the rejection of Thatcherism and the British Empire as 'English' phenomena, people in Scotland have identified themselves as more highly 'Scottish' than 'British' compared to people in England identifying themselves as more 'English' than 'British'. For example, between 1997 and 2001, the percentage of people in Scotland saying they were 'Scottish, not British' and

'more Scottish than British' rose from 61 per cent to 66 per cent, while the percentage of people in England saying they were 'English, not British' and 'more English than British' rose from a much lower base of 24 per cent to 30 per cent. Again, this demonstrates the vehicle of rejecting the values of Conservatism in the form of 'new' Labour was primarily through a distinct version of Scottish national identity.

Putting these strands together produces a situation of social significance. Thus, Scots who identify themselves as predominantly 'Scottish' are further to the left on workers' rights and social justice issues than other Scots who identify themselves as equally 'Scottish/British'. But Scots who identify themselves as equally 'Scottish/British' are also more to the left on these issues than Scots who identify themselves as 'predominantly British'. Not unexpectedly then, Scots who identify themselves as predominantly 'Scottish' are also further to the left on issues of workers' rights and social justice than those in England who identify themselves as 'predominantly English', 'equally English/British' or 'predominantly British'.

Not only do those who identify themselves as 'working class' in Scotland tend to be to the left of those who identify themselves as working class in England, but the same is true for people who identify themselves as middle class in Scotland compared to England

What particularly stands out though is that Scots who identify themselves as equally 'Scottish/British' are also more to the left on these issues than those in England who identify themselves as 'predominantly English', 'equally English/British' or 'predominantly British'

When the four strands come together, another interesting situation arises. Not only do those who identify themselves as 'working class' in Scotland tend to be to the left on workers' rights and social justice issues than those who identify themselves as working class in England, but the same is true for people who identify themselves as middle class in Scotland compared to those who identify themselves as middle class in England. All this is holds true when the comparison is between 'Scotland' and 'England' or between 'Scotland' and 'the rest of Britain'. But the pattern of 'Scottish radicalism' and 'English conservatism' begins to break down when the comparison is between Scotland and different parts of England and the rest of Britain. This is because comparing Scotland to England does not compare like with like in terms of population sizes, economic and industrial structures, workforce composition and political heritages. Neither does it take into account significant internal variations with Scotland or England. So the more appropriate comparison is between Scotland and Wales, and Scotland and various regions of England like the north-west. Across a range of attitudes related to workers' rights and social justice issues, people in Wales and the north of England show similarly left-wing views to those in Scotland. Scots are generally no more or no less 'red' than those in these other areas.

In terms of the prevalence of union membership, union recognition, collective bargaining and strikes since 1979, Scotland has seldom been out of the top quartile in the league table of the twelve government regions of Britain. So by dint of these measures, Scotland is clearly more 'red' and radical than London, the south-east, the south west, and eastern England. But Scotland is no more 'red' and radical than the north-east of England, the north-west, Yorkshire and Humberside and Wales. Indeed, on these latter measures, the north-west of England is probably more 'red' and radical. This kind of evidence of regional radicalism provided the basis for the characterisation in the early 1980s of Sheffield being the capital of the 'Socialist Republic of South Yorkshire'. Even then, these other 'red' geographical regions still lack what Scotland has. Wales has a defined sense of a socially progressive national identity but it is much weaker and less persuasive. Regions like Yorkshire and Merseyside also have strong senses of socially progressive regional identities, but they are a 'poor substitute' compared to a vibrant and all encompassing left-leaning Scottish national identity. Put another way, even if Scotland and these other geographical areas all had the same high levels of radicalism, to those populaces in Wales, Yorkshire and Merseyside, this evidence would have less significance because of the absence of a pervasive national identity infused with social democratic values.

So there is a strong and continuing link between what it means to be Scottish and radical thought and action. To most people being 'Scottish' is seen to inherently mean being to the left-of-

centre, and upholding the values of community, solidarity and compassion. This version of innate 'Scottishness' castigates other Scots which sees their version of 'Scottishness' being about free enterprise and individual rights. The key turning point in this process was the period of Thatcherism between 1979 and 1997. After consecutive rejections of Thatcherism at the polls, the ideas of devolution and independence increasingly came to the fore as the shields that could protect Scots against alien ravages. Here took place the quintessential fusion of 'Scottishness' and 'radicalism' because of a broad cross-party and cross-class campaigning alliance led by the STUC. The creation, and the very name, of the 'Scotland United' pressure group after the 1992 general election provides a stark reminder of this. Although gaining one more seat, the Tories had just 11 of the Scottish 72 seats, leading people from various political hues, like George Galloway and Alex Salmond, and none to come together to declare Scotland 'a Tory-free zone' where the government had no mandate to rule.

People in Scotland have found political solace in sustaining this perception of themselves as 'radical' because of the very decline in actual radicalism

So there is evidence of a 'red' and 'radical' Scotland. It does not cover all of Scotland and the people that live within her but it has become more persuasive than the hard evidence strictly merits because of the way in which most Scots define themselves socially and politically. One result of this process of social construction is that a common feature of left-leaning writing and thinking on the nature of society in Scotland has been the joining up of the dots between events displaying manifest radicalism, like 'Red Clydeside' of 1919 and the 1971-2 Upper Clyde Shipbuilders' work-in. This creates a tangible but not wholly justified impression of continual and unceasing radicalism. What is fascinating is that the fusion of left-wing views and national identity in Scotland has taken place during a decline in radicalism, most graphically displayed by falling union membership and

strike activity across Britain. Despite thinking of themselves as radical, people in Scotland did act en masse in a particularly radical manner.

People in Scotland have found political solace in sustaining this perception of themselves as 'radical' because of the very decline in actual radicalism. In this mindset, figures like John MacLean and Tommy Sheridan become iconic symbols of a wellspring of popular radicalism, sometimes imagined, sometimes real. But despite this radical mindset, most Scots (that vote) continued voting for a party of the working class that openly proclaimed itself to be a party of the whole British nation. And no other major political party, like the SNP, has sought to represent this current of thought, leading the political disenfranchisement of many Scots. This continuing radicalism of the mind amongst Scots raises the intriguing issue of whether the subjective state of people's consciousness and ideas can begin to alter the objective state of social reality. Thus, if significant numbers of people in Scotland view 'Scotland' as being in their own image, does this begin to make Scotland so? ■

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fàilte gu la nouvelle dordogne

As a tidal wave of wealthy White Settlers and holiday-homers pours into the old Rough Bounds of west Lochaber, Iain Fraser Grigor asks - how long now till there is no room left for the native Highlander?

Once it was known as the most Highland area of mainland Scotland - the old Jacobite na Garbh Chriochan or Rough Bounds of west Lochaber, arcing in a gracious crescent from Ardnamurchan in the south to the soft lands of Morar and the fishing port of Mallaig in the north. But in the last decade a property-price tsunami has rolled north across the Highlands, powered by the long, hot housing boom in the distant Home Counties of southern England. And if it goes on much longer - locals are now beginning to urgently ask - then for how much longer will the indigenous population of the area withstand the pressures of wealth, and the irresistible purchasing-power that marches with it hand in hand?

The problem is not just one of rich White Settlers moving up and in for good and driving property prices sky-high in the process. Many properties in the area are already holiday homes, empty for much of the year while locals look on in silent wonder. Meantime for locals with the cash to self-build their own houses they face a savage shortage of land for such development - almost incredible in a district with an average population density of four people per square mile. Incredible, perhaps - but true. Charlie King, Highland council member for the Mallaig and Morar area bluntly says "Where do you want me to begin? There is nowhere in this area where housing is not needed. We need accommodation for local people, we need to be able to open-up sites for self-build. We have many

local young people in this area who could self-build their own home but land prices are extortionate." King says that in his council ward alone, two-thirds of rented public housing has now passed to the private sector, thanks to Tory right-to-buy policies - although he adds "It was not such a bad thing here, as the houses were generally bought by members of the immediate family. But it has had a terrible effect in some other districts". And he goes on "We must get land to build on, whether for affordable houses or self-build, it's a massive problem really. We are building 18 affordable houses in Mallaig and another four in Morar, and are in negotiations with the local landowner

to get another 18 in Arisaig - we will fill them all instantly with local people. The problem is, the incomers have more money than the locals. It's happening all over the Highlands. It is nothing for someone in London to sell a house for £500,000, and get one up here - if you are lucky - for £200,000. So you have £300,000 to spare - it's better than a pension for these people. Of course local people don't have a hope of getting a house".

King's comments follow a surge in property prices in the Highlands, where there are an astonishing 9,000 people on the list for rented housing. In the picturesque village of Plockton, just a few miles to the north of Mallaig, over

half the houses are holiday homes. While there are almost 50 people on the local housing list, and the primary school role has

In Morar, 45 per cent of the houses are already holiday-homes or occupied by elderly locals - prompting the question, what happens to the village when their houses come on the property market?



halved from 80 to 39 in just six years, a former council house was recently offered for sale at offers over £300,000. To the south, more than 2,000 new houses to buy and rent are needed in Argyll and Bute in next five years. On Mull (nicknamed The Officers' Mess in the 1970s on account of its prominent White Settler population) the situation is particularly serious. House prices on the island have soared by a staggering 50 per cent in the last year alone. One third of the houses on the island are holiday-homes (though some may belong to locals forced to work off the island), while one fifth of the population lives in 'temporary' accommodation. And while over four per cent live 'rent-free' (ie. invisible homelessness), no less than half of the council houses on Mull have been lost through 'right to buy'. In Morar, meanwhile, just to the south of Mallaig, 45 per cent of the houses are already holiday-homes or occupied by elderly locals – prompting the question, what happens to the village when their houses come on the property market? And the village's mainly-Gaelic (and extremely-successful) primary school is also under threat of closure.

"Primitive hunter-gatherer people would need a population density to survive here of about two people per square kilometre", says Mairi MacLean, chair of Morar community council. "We have four - so that shows how far down the economic scale we really are." I agree that some of the White Settlers are responsible for putting the final nail in the coffin of dying Highland villages. Our politicians just think there is something wrong with our confidence, while White Settlers think there is something backward in our mentality and that they just need to apply a Home Counties bandage to make us better. Our landed gentry were responsible for all of this in the beginning and many of the White Settlers are only too happy to continue in this vein – once they have settled here they think it's their duty to stop all development. They buy up scarce properties, live off their capital and pensions and have no need to see the area flourish to accommodate the young up-and-coming whom they have displaced. And in Arisaig – where locals joke that the welcome sign in Gaelic at the entrance to the village Fàilte gu Arasaig should now be replaced by a sign saying Fàilte gu la nouvelle Dordogne - the situation is especially critical.

Economic – and cultural – conflict is nothing new in Arisaig, of course. In the 19th century, the landlords here were especially dreadful. As the minutes of the famous Crofters' Royal Commission from the early 1880s make clear, a reign of terror characterised their concept of 'estate-management' from the beginning. The commission heard evidence from the famously radical Church of Scotland minister Donald MacCallum. MacCallum (who would later serve a weekend in gaol in Skye for Land League activities) told of the fearful record of eviction from the district, which had emptied the nearby Rhu peninsula of people. As MacCallum said, "One does not like to say that these English have a positive hatred to the native Highlander, but there is something at the bottom of it".

According to the Highland Council's census returns of 2001, Arisaig's population was in that year just 442 people – down five per cent on ten years earlier. One quarter of the population had not been born in Scotland, and of the occupied houses half were

owner-occupied and the other half rented. Holiday and vacant homes in the village totalled no less than 20 per cent of the total housing stock – compared to a Highland average of 10 per cent and a Scottish average of five per cent. And meantime, in the village where the great Gaelic poet Alasdair MacMhaighstir Alasdair finds his last resting place, asking prices of desirable houses are said to be soaring towards the £300,000 mark. As one close observer of the local scene said, "It is not just an economic issue here, it is a cultural one. Some incomers are worthy additions to any community, and there are those here. But historically, Arisaig's cultural affinity with the Home Counties is somewhat limited. So, for much of the time, it is a bad mix. They bring their commodity value-system here, have their dinner parties and admire the scenery – but they are as alien to the spirit of the old Rough Bounds as the colonial White Settlers ever were to Africa".

And southward into Moidart and Ardnamurchan, meantime, the situation is worse, with the proportion of people not born in Scotland rising to one-third, and the proportion of vacant and holiday homes also at one third. Michael Foxley, councillor for the district (and vice-convenor of Highland Council), says there is a huge problem with housing in his area. At least half of the houses in west Ardnamurchan are holiday homes for starters, he says. And he adds, "Land for new-build is fantastically expensive for locals. A quarter-acre site without services costs between £50,000 and £100,000 here. You certainly won't get anything for less than £40,000. Locals don't have a hope. I mean, how will you ever get a house if you are a local person employed in minimum-wage seasonal hotel work?" Foxley says that not even key workers like teachers can afford a house now in the district he represents. He adds that at the moment there is one house on sale in Strontian at offers over £330,000 – or one third of a million pounds. "You can see how it is happening", he says. "I know someone in London who is living

in a house worth one or two million. He got his first house 20 years ago for £12,000 and sold it for £50,000. He got his second for £100,000 and now it's worth at least £1.5 million. There are tens of thousands of people like him. So if you sell your place for £1 million and buy a house here for £300,000 you still have £700,000 to play with. How can locals compete with that? Of course it is a cultural issue as well as an economic one."

Solutions are few and far between. Highland Council insists that any new-build development contains at least one-quarter affordable homes for locals. The Scottish Executive might abolish right-to-buy for new tenancies in public housing. And Highland Council wants to charge 90 per cent council tax on holiday homes (though Foxley himself favoured a punitive rate of 200 per cent). And meantime the tidal-wave of settlers and holidays homes rolls ever onwards and upwards. ■

Iain Fraser Grigor's "Highland Resistance - the radical tradition in the Scottish north" was published by Mainstream in 2000

reviews

Building a Nation: Post Devolution

Nationalism in Scotland

Kenny MacAskill, Luath, Edinburgh, £4.99

Where stands Scotland post-devolution, and what is the future for nationalism in a devolved Parliament? Have nationalism and the SNP been killed 'stone dead' or has Parliament given them a roadmap to independence? These are the questions MacAskill asks. He begins by concurring with the view that so far the Scottish Parliament has dashed the expectations of ordinary people, partly as a result of being neutered from the outset but partly also because of its initial inward-looking perspective. This, he concludes, requires that its powers should be expanded and that the SNP should be a modern social democratic party.

But it is here that the problems begin. First, independence is seen as the national aspiration for democracy and freedom, with social issues coming a poor second. Throughout, MacAskill's unit of analysis is the 'nation' and the 'people'. Consequently, there is no differentiation between rich and poor, ruling class, middle class and working class. In his world, we are all assumed to have pretty much the same interest by being Scottish. Second, wishing to avoid being a statist party of old has led MacAskill to be unable to contemplate how nation states can help circumvent global capital and stop formal independence being transduced into the realpolitik of capitalist interdependence.

MacAskill argues that the Scottish Parliament should be used a vehicle to create further social change but provides no tangible sense of how this could be done and where extra-parliamentary activity could play a role. In short, he provides no 'road map'. His style of writing is repetitious, full of bold but bald assertions and vague and vacuous statements. If you wanted nothing other than a reasonable argument about the matters at hand with someone you met one night down the pub, this would do.

This makes the comment of nationalist academic, Professor James Mitchell of Strathclyde University, that **Building A Nation** is a 'possibly seminal contribution' a little farcical to say the least. The SNP is in a prolonged ideological crisis between poles of gradualism and fundamentalism on the one hand and left-wing social democracy and right-wing social democracy on the other. This is clear from the attraction MacAskill has for both Ireland and Sweden, so he remains torn between competition and compassion. ■

Professor Gregor Gall

UHI – The Making of a University

Graham Hills and Robin Lingard, Dunedin Academic Press, Edinburgh 2004, £25, 272 pages.

Within two years or so Scotland should - at long and weary last - be able to lay claim to a university indubitably set in and specifically designed for the Highlands and Islands. Given the

sclerotic, careerist and cheapskate wastelands to which so many of our traditional institutions of higher education are presently reduced, this may be counted as something of a miracle. It will also serve as testament to the vision and enduring energy of a host of public agencies from the Millennium Commission to the Open University (though not many other universities), and from Highland Council and its predecessor to Highlands and Islands Enterprise (and its predecessor to in the shape of the Highlands and Islands Development Board). And when - as is likely - UHI is allowed in 2007 to validate its own degree courses and thereby assumes the mantle of a modest but fully-fledged university, there will be cause to mark the gigantic contribution made to educational provision in the Highlands by Graham Hills and Robin Lingard, joint authors of **UHI – The Making of a University**. These men know their stuff - as indeed they should. Lingard specialised in high-tech industrial policy at a senior level in the Civil Service and was first director of the UHI Project, as it was known in its early days. And Hills - a former member of Downing Street's Advisory Council on Science and Technology - is a onetime Principal and Vice Chancellor of the University of Strathclyde.

The idea of a university in the Scottish north is nothing new, of course. The town-council of Inverness favoured it as early as the 1830s, and there was similar sort of talk towards the end of the 19th century. Post World War Two, Inverness was again demanding a fifth (as it then would have been) university for Scotland, located in the Highlands; and the local authorities returned to the matter in the 1960s, decade of the famous Robbins Report into the future of higher education in Britain. In the event, however, the one brand-new university proposed for Scotland went to Stirling. But the Highlands and Islands Development Board, established by Labour in 1965, campaigned for the idea over the next 25 years. And the hope survived the Board's transition of identity to Highlands and Islands Enterprise in 1991, in which year Graham Hills became academic adviser to the UHI Project (with Robin Lingard coming aboard the following year as director).

Very quickly, it became clear that nobody was proposing an old-style university - the authors are savage in their critique of traditional approaches to learning. By the beginning of the 1990s it was already clear that developments in communications technology might make possible untried approaches to pedagogy, and would certainly have a shattering effect on established educational practices and structures. So why not design from scratch a university for the 21st century, which would match Highland needs in terms of the local labour-market, help prevent the endless and uni-directional drain of educable talent (much of it involuntary) to the wine-bars of Byres Road and Hanover Street, and act generally as an economic, technological and intellectual blood-transfusion for the region? By 1992 the main lines of development were clear. In terms of management, the proposed university would draw on the existing providers of formal post-school education in the Highlands, such as the further-education colleges. "The model most favoured is that of a distributed network of independent colleges linked to a small administrative hub it should endeavour to take the form of a dispersed network of near-autonomous satellites, each reflecting local needs and local interests and each inputting into the network as well as receiving course components from it."

As Hills wrote as early as 1992, "It would be a deliberate policy of the new university to blur the present distinction between education and training. It would therefore seek to provide courses offering coherent mixtures of vocational and non-vocational studies and at levels ranging from foundation studies to the honours degree". Much of this was ideally attuned to the skills-development and lifelong-learning mantras of the 1990s (not all of which derived from government attempts to fiddle downwards the length of the dole-queues). Some of it, of course, might well be said to be making a virtue of necessity. Some of it also begged bigger questions than it answered – not least the question of how it was all going to be financed. And in a decade of soaring student numbers and falling revenues in the established older-style universities, this was no mean question, no mean challenge.

The Scottish Office, staffed by career civil-servants who were all products of those old-style universities, and all past-masters in the arts of preservation of the status-quo, was unremittingly hostile (though Michael Forsyth proved to be a good friend of the UHI Project). Hostile too were the managements of nearly all of those old-style universities. And then, in 1996, the UHI Project got the one stroke of supreme luck that it deserved. With little time to spare, an application was drafted and sent-off to the Millennium Commission. Nobody knew what might happen - or when. But everyone knew that, realistically, the future of the UHI Project was now in the balance. The response, when it came, came in the form of a very curious fusion of communications technology indeed.

"Finally, early on 30 September, the Project director received a cryptic telephone call from the UHI case-officer at the Commission. A letter was about to be faxed through, but she could not say what would be in it. As a small group clustered by the fax machine in the corner of the officer, the atmosphere was sombre. This didn't seem the way to convey good news. The letter that emerged was therefore all the more of a shock." In fact, the UHI Project got over £33 million from the Commission; the financial bedrock of the development witnessed since then. This process of development was certainly discontinuous, and the authors do not flinch from reference to the ferocious in-fighting which nearly destroyed the UHI Project in the late 1990s. But it was soon back on track, with formal designation by the Scottish Parliament as an institution of higher education being granted in 2001.

And at the end of the academic session 2003-2004, just over 200 students graduated with UHI degrees validated by the ever-helpful Open University. In other words, what must have seemed a near-impossible dream just 15 years ago is today very much a reality. The rest is up to UHI itself and the recently-established Scottish Council for Higher and Further Education. That - and the goodwill and assistance of the Scottish Parliament. ■

Iain Fraser Grigor

This City Now: Glasgow and its working class past

Ian R Mitchell, Luath Press, £12.99, 1-84282-082-6

As an east-coaster and Edinburgh resident, I approached writing this review as impartially as was possible. I need have

had no fears on this for **This City Now** is a thoughtful, incisive, and knowledgeable tour around the working class districts of Glasgow written by an author who has a love of Glasgow but is no 'Glasgow nationalist'. Glasgow's working class past is recounted and understood but not unduly idolised.

The premise of *This City Now* is two-fold. First, walking around the streets of Glasgow today can reveal much of its working class history through its buildings and urban make-up. Second, where those buildings that have a historic importance for the working class but have long since disappeared, knowledge of the urban geography and history of Glasgow's streets can help create a mental picture of what was. Thus, Mitchell takes the reader on a sightseers' social history tour with chapters on Pollokshaws, Govanhill, Govan, Gorbals, Clydebank, Yoker and Scotstoun, Partick, Anderston, Maryhill, Possil, Dennistoun, Springburn, Parkhead, Rutherglen and Bridgeton. By giving a commentary and history of the streets he walked around, Mitchell puts major figures and events not so much on the 'map' but on the 'A-Z'. He calls this 'politicising the pavements'. Thus, the daily life of John Malean is recounted as he moved around the Southside agitating and proselytising, as are the struggles of the Calton Weavers in 1787 and the huge battle surrounding the work-in at Upper Clyde Shipbuilders in 1971. Others like Harry McShane and Willie Gallagher are brought back to life in their locales.

The backdrop to the activities of individuals and collectives alike is the historical totality of Glasgow as the second city of the British Empire, and as a world city. Mitchell argues much of the importance of Glasgow lies in "key political questions of the early twentieth century [like] imperialism, war and revolution [being] more clearly posed [here]... than elsewhere in Britain". **This City Now** details the expansion, contraction and other developments in the city's population (1951: 1m, 2005: 0.6m), its industry, transport infrastructure, housing and municipal amenities. The internal dynamics of the city are used to explain why some areas became vibrant and then declined, and why other were always rich or poor. Attention is given over to explaining the changing significance of women, drink, ethnicity, religion, and football in Glasgow's make-up.

Glasgow has seen a different array of industries dominate it at different times: mining and textiles, then tobacco and milling, followed by stevedoring, locomotive building, shipbuilding and heavy engineering. Because of their decline, Mitchell calls Glasgow, the 'Naples of the North'. Throughout the chapters, Mitchell details the political dynamics of trade unionism, the cooperative movement, left political parties (Labour, ILP, Communist), community groups, tenant associations in the city and outlines the importance of key workplaces like Albion, Parkhead Forge, Weirs and Yarrow for these.

This City Now is not just a 'history of the past'. It also covers some very recent events and developments. Throw away your longstanding mental A-Z of Glasgow and use this book to take a fresh, insightful look at what many believe in Gaelic to be 'the dear green place'. My only point of criticism would be that although supporting and cited texts are named throughout, a wider practice of referencing would have allowed the reader with an interest in specific areas of Glasgow to have used this book as an entrée into further study and research. ■

Professor Gregor Gall

web review

Henry McCubbin

OK culture vultures I thought that we could offer you some source material for the theme topic of this edition. First you have the Culture Commission's Final Report. It's lengthy but downloading at least will let you use Adobe's search engine for you to find your favourite cultural pastime. www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2005/06/22145256/52593

To find out the spread of the tentacles of the organisation which is under greatest scrutiny in the above report look in www.scottisharts.org.uk and you will find the Scottish Arts Council. Another organisation funded out of public money with an interest in the arts as a product is at www.visitscotland.com/aboutscotland/culture/. For those interested in information on the arts in the Highlands you can find it on www.hi-arts.co.uk/.

As to where you can find out more about the diversity of all this activity in Scotland, Glasgow University has listed some it for us at www.culturalpolicy.arts.gla.ac.uk/research/ncs_funding.html. Indeed some of the basic information used by the Commission is listed with links at www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2005/09/0191729/18050.

But of course how the Commission's report was received is of interest and some of the reports and attitudes can be found at:

www.scottishgreens.org.uk/site/id/4776/title/Cultural_Commission_Report.html

www.thestage.co.uk/news/newsstory.php/9807/msps-dismiss-plan-to-replace-scottish-arts

and at heritage.scotsman.com/news.cfm?id=1980122005.

In addition, Eddie McGuire used the following sites in preparing his article in this issue:

www.culturalcommission.org.uk

www.musiciansunion.org.uk

www.scottishmusiccentre.com

www.scottisharts.org.uk

www.whistlebinkies.net

www.workers.org.uk

www.college-of-piping.co.uk

www.heritagefutures.net

www.greentrax.com

www.delphianrecords.co.uk

www.tuaeuc.org.uk

www.scottishgreens.org.uk

www.connector.org

www.equity.org.uk

www.sau.org.uk

www.dundeerep.co.uk

www.handsupfortrad.co.uk

www.bectu.org.uk

www.donaldgorrie.co.uk

www.linnrecords.com

feedback

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Following our edition on the attitudes of the left in Scotland towards Europe (SLR 130), an event has taken place which illustrates the need for us to apply our thoughts to this topic. On 19 -20 October the European Unitarian Left Group in the European Parliament held a meeting in London in advance of the mini summit called by the Blair administration at Hampstead Court.

At the London meeting the topic of the privatisation of ferry services was raised and to the great surprise of the RMT members present it was revealed that a Left Group's MEP was the rapporteur for the particular piece of legislation referred to by the Scottish Executive as justification for putting our ferry services in Scotland out to tender. He assured them that the legislation had been blocked by the European Parliament but that there was no law to force individual countries to use a tendering process against their wishes. Further, the Left Group were going to Marseilles to discuss the same problem which

has occurred over the Corsican Ferry service where the right wing French Government also wanted to sell off the nationalised ferry service.

This is another classic case of blaming Europe by Blair and Co. to avoid owing up to wanting to sell off national assets and in Scotland Nichol Steven is most comfortable to implement neo-liberal policies which throw his old friends, from when he was a PR with transport accounts, a juicy bone now and then.

Henry McCubbin

Kick Up The Tabloids

DEEP FRIED MOTORWAY SCANDAL

Having spent much of the last month out of the country, it is surprising how much can change and how much stay the same in the space of a few short weeks. I spent the first half of October doing gigs in Cyprus, a world away from life on the Scottish comedy circuit. Leaving a dark, cold, wet country colonised by the English for a warm, sunny, dry country colonised by the English. I seldom read British papers when abroad, mainly because the most readily-available tends to be the Daily Mail. I can never understand why people who leave Britain want to read about how disgusting and dangerous all foreigners are.

When I left, Scotland were still in with the slimmest of chances of getting through to the 2006 World Cup, David McLetchie was jumping into a contract cab en route to Tynecastle to witness George Burley taking Hearts to the giddy heights of league leadership, the US was incompetently dealing with another hurricane which they claim was unconnected to global warming and Al Qaeda posed the greatest threat to our safety. I returned to find Scotland out of the World Cup, McLetchie falling on his sword, Burley getting his jotters, Hearts returning to their more accustomed role of a national joke, the US coping incompetently with yet another hurricane which they claim was nothing at all whatsoever to do with global warming and the greatest threat to our safety being posed by chickens. Ironically, McLetchie has been replaced by a woman who bears an uncanny physical likeness to Foghorn Leghorn.

The very day I returned, the whole of central Scotland's traffic system was in gridlock, due to a spillage of lard on the M74. Not content with clogging our arteries, we've now started clogging our arterial roads. But how desperate are we to get our junk food hit that we try to deep-fry a motorway? Health concerns continue to hog the headlines as we all struggle to come to terms with the fact that not only will 90 per cent of us be killed by bird flu by Christmas, but that estimates of up to 70,000 newspaper articles and TV features may be written about the subject telling us that nobody knows whether any of us is really at risk or not.

Meanwhile, MP's down south debate whether to follow Scotland's lead in imposing a blanket ban on smoking in enclosed public spaces. The smoking ban at home looms ever closer and continues to divide opinion. While no-one can argue against the aim of protecting the health of bar staff, it has to be realised that in many pubs in Scotland anyone concerned about their physical well-being is likely to count getting through a Saturday night without getting stabbed as probably higher-up on your list of priorities. However, it must be re-assuring to find that even if

a major rammy gets totally out-of-control with tables flying, people glassed and pool cues used as spears, no-one will have inhaled anyone else's secondary cigarette fumes.

With New Labour seemingly obsessed with the twin enemies of obesity and tobacco, it is a shame that the Tories will not now be led by a fat smoker. Although it must be said, fatness and smoking are about the only two things at all endearing about Kenneth Clarke. Longevity is never a good characteristic in a Tory leader. Controversy, however, still revolves around whether or not Conservative hopeful David Cameron took drugs in the past. Again, if he did, who could blame him? Anyone who had to share an office with Norman Lamont at the time of Black Monday was probably permanently off their face at the time, although there was of course the slight inconvenience of the boss's visa card getting knocked-back at the off-licence. Indeed, there is a long history of excessive drug consumption among Tory leaders. Churchill was famously pissed throughout World War II, William Hague once came out with the ludicrous boast of drinking thirty pints a day while working as a dray man, John Major and Iain Duncan-Smith both gave the impression on being on a course of fairly heavy-duty tranquilisers while Margaret Thatcher appeared to me to spend most the 1980's seemingly out-of-control on a cocktail of gin, speed, ketamine, methylated spirits and magic mushrooms.

As Christmas approaches, we are treated yet again to that traditional seasonal entertainment, the David Blunkett resignation. Let's face it, it's pretty difficult to claim there's no conflict of interest when you own shares in a DNA testing company and also go around claiming to have got other people's wives pregnant. The Blunkett saga does raise the question 'Is Blair now a lame duck?'. In the current panic over bird flu, a duck (lame or otherwise) could be a very frightening prospect. ■

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 or beyond. The Kick Up the Tabloids team include regulars Bruce Devlin, Susan Morrison, Paul Sneddon, Frankie Boyle and Miles Jupp with surprise 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). Doors open at 7.30pm, with the show kicking off at 9pm.

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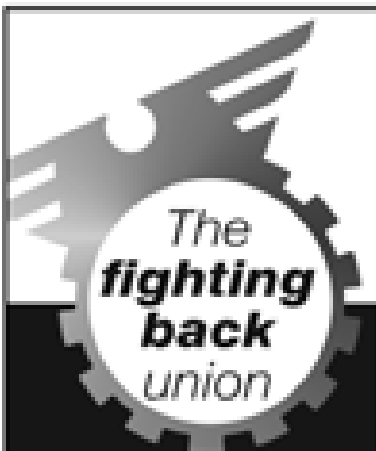
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