

the hidden revolution



how this year's local elections will change everything

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Comment

Scotland is about to face its biggest political upheaval since devolution. In fact, there are some regards in which it will have an even more profound effect on party politics in Scotland than did the establishment of the Parliament. But the national media appears to be paying very little attention. How can this be?

Well, because the revolution is a local revolution and already the Scottish media has created a world in which only a small number of party apparatchiks and another small group of 'the great and the good' have anything to say about politics. It is the reason that the Scottish political media is so often embarrassingly wrong and out of touch with what is going on. About a year ago the Scottish press was filled with 'think' pieces telling us that the SNP was over as a political force. About a year later and the same papers are filled with the same 'thinkers' telling us that the SNP is about to storm to victory. And what has changed in this period? Nothing of substance.

At the weekend of finalising this issue of the Scottish Left Review the corporate-owned media is filled with stories and comments about – who knows what it will be called – the 'Scottish Voice' or the 'Scottish Democrats'. This is the new Scottish People's Alliance; the people are different but every four years some rich white man decides that the political parties don't measure up to his standards and announces that he is going to create a political party. Our latest rich crackpot doesn't even appear to know what purpose his party exists to promote, and yet the corporate media drools. Nobody (really, nobody at all) thinks there is any chance that any candidates will be elected, and yet it gets much more coverage than some of the political parties which almost certainly will get elected in May.

That the media is regularly massively wrong in its prescriptions is perhaps an unfair criticism – after all, the amount of political comment it produces means that it is bound to be wrong sometimes. And the obsession with the rich is fashion of the day ('do you have millions of pounds? In that case we are interested in your views on how education should be run.'). But the media blindness about what is going to happen in May is inexplicable,

other than by reminding ourselves of its insularity. Neither of Scotland's two big quality dailies dedicates any serious resource to covering local government. In our mediated age, this means that local government disappears. We get a view of political Scotland which is shaped and retold by 'professionals', the squad of party advisors and strategists and political journalists they talk to. But these professionals are very often completely detached from politics as many of us recognise it. Advisors and strategists were offered a job on the basis of some columns they wrote in a newspaper or on some networking they did while running a consultancy, or because they had the right family links. They have often never been close to the 'mucky' bits of politics where local constituency parties have to campaign on doorsteps defending the unpopular policies dreamed up by the 'strategists' in response to the requests of rich benefactors. Meanwhile, the journalists have created a profession in which the only thing that is of any importance is what they write. Giant fields of political debate are beyond their understanding (one of Scotland's better political correspondents had to ask someone what was the song being sung at the end of the meeting, guiltily admitting afterwards that he probably should have known the Internationale).

Should we care? Well, yes we should. The non-political political professionals eventually catch up with the real world. It only takes a couple of opinion polls to alert them to the fact that the SNP isn't finished after all. Likewise, before 2007 is out they will suddenly discover a number of things they didn't quite grasp previously. For example, they will discover that local government as a national political issue has been artificially suppressed. In large parts of Scotland local government has been seen as little more than a backroom administrative function tacked onto the administration of the Labour Party. There are parts of Scotland where local government has almost been abolished – council executives administer but don't do any of the things that might constitute govern, such as holding meetings of elected representatives to decide policy. In Lanarkshire, Glasgow and Ayrshire, opposition Councillors focus on trying to win any concessions they can for their local communities. Achieving political goals (such as challenging the contracting-out of major local government services) is seen as pointless because it is pointless.

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From the other direction (from central government) local government is seen as a problem to be managed. As Gordon Morgan, Bob Thomson and Isobel Lindsay point out in their articles in this issue, the Scottish Executive (both elected and civil service) are following a longstanding tradition of viewing local authorities as unfortunate but probably necessary means of service delivery. The use of less than 10 per cent of local authority budgets remains in the discretionary control of councils; the rest is handed out by central government almost like the book vouchers we might give to a child we fear would spend free money on alcopops. Meanwhile, the budgets of local authorities have been squeezed relentlessly, both by tight funding settlements and the loading-on of additional responsibilities. And the idea that national politics might include a debate about the role and purpose of local government seems to be completely missing. Think about all the public debate about the powers the Scottish Parliament could/should/might have and compare with how much debate you've heard about what powers local authorities might have.

How can this have come to pass? It is a rule of politics that contempt, control and underfunding brings with it a political backlash. Where have the local authorities been? Where is the collective campaign for better funding? Where is the manifesto for revitalising local government by reimagining its role and powers? Where is the anger? Certainly not coming from CoSLA, a 'pressure group' which is so heavily dominated by the political party it ought to be putting pressure on that it would look like bipolar disorder if it were actually to do or say anything. The dominant party wants no trouble, the opposition parties could see no point in fighting for power and prestige which would have been gifted largely to their opponent. There is no mistake to be made; local government in Scotland is so dysfunctional that almost everyone concerned has some sort of motivation to do nothing to change anything.

Until now. To national journalists the story was simply one about whether Jack McConnell would write himself out of history by taking on the vested interests of his local councillors. In fact, it was an enormous and wholesale change to politics in Scotland. When the Executive coalition negotiated a form of proportional representation for local elections in Scotland

it did a number of things which the mainstream doesn't seem yet to have grasped. Firstly, it hollowed out the entire Labour Party in Scotland. As Steve Cardownie points out in his article, Labour is actually putting forward for election 20 per cent fewer councillors than it currently has. For a very long time the Labour Party has been built at grassroot level on its councillor base – the political commentators still don't seem to realise that the bodies which selected the candidates for the Holyrood elections were dominated by local councillors and their wives, siblings, children and friends. This is coming to an end. As a generation of automatic party workers dissolves, what will happen to Labour? And what of the corollary – the other parties gaining this benefit proportionately themselves? Everything will change.

And what of the practices of local government? Local authorities can act like a check and balance on central power if they want to – and they did throughout the Tory years. Now Holyrood will face an independent tier of government which it can no longer assume will do exactly as it is told. Even now, within the powers of local authorities, the Executive's policy on PFI can be all but ended. What then? What if local authorities decide to get militant on issues such as nuclear power, nuclear weapons, criminal justice, social care? Cathy Jamieson may have to think twice before she chides councils for not issuing enough asbos – they may reply this time. The dynamic of government will change. And the terms of debate will change. Surely CoSLA will become much quicker to put pressure on the Executive? Surely a revived local government sector will push debate about its roles and responsibilities onto the agenda? Surely local authorities will extricate themselves from the boxes in which they seem to have been kept.

This hidden revolution is coming and it cannot be stopped. So far the self-appointed 'guardians' of what constitutes 'political' in Scotland have deemed to marginalise this enormous debate. That many politically interested people reading this issue of the Scottish Left Review are likely to be startled by the implications of what is coming is another condemnation of the establishment. In this case, however, the failing can only be temporary. The local is about to become national. ■

local government: a survival plan

A radical reappraisal of what local government is for is urgently needed, argue
Gordon Morgan and Bob Thompson

"It appears to us, from widespread evidence we have received from local government, that there is a corrosive argument about the relationship between central and local government. If this is so, then in order to resolve the argument the Scottish Parliament, the Scottish Executive and the local authorities must grasp this nettle. Unless and until they do so, the underlying problems and consequent less than optimal structures will remain. The Committee cannot emphasise too strongly their recommendation that action must be taken quickly."

Recommendation One of the Local Government Finance Review Committee

The present system of Local Government is unviable and must change. Due to the introduction of STV we are about to see the largest intake of fresh councillors since 1973. Many of these councillors will be in effect full-time, eager to make their mark and bring fresh demands for change. Yet the powers of local government have never been weaker, the control of day to day activity in councils by London and the Scottish Executive never stronger: local authority chief executives estimate councils have actual discretionary control over 10 per cent or less of the money they spend – the remainder is required to be spent on critical essential services or is ring-fenced by ministers.

There are no agreed constitutional guidelines or conventions governing relations between Holyrood and Councils. The European Charter for Local Self Government, signed by the UK government, is not part of the Scotland Act nor have its provisions been translated into Scottish law. The proposals of the Mackintosh commission (1999) that there should be a Covenant between the Parliament and the local authorities have not been implemented. The Scottish Parliament remains free to impose duties on local authorities without giving them the freedom to effectively choose how to meet their obligations.

We have a recipe for increased conflict between the Scottish Executive and the local authorities. The public increasingly feels alienated from many of the agencies of government. Unless a proper role is found for the largest group of directly elected politicians in Scotland, democracy as a whole will be undermined. In England a similar situation exists and the UK government is considering a reorganisation of local government in England. The evidence to date is that this will be driven more by concerns about managerial efficiency than enhancing democracy. In Scotland the interventions of Audit Scotland and the Executive in Inverclyde and West Dumbarton councils raise similar concerns. The left in Scotland needs to discuss and agree the main changes required to make councils in Scotland a strong, independent and effective tier of democracy able to work with and not against a strengthened Scottish Parliament.

A Brief History of Local Government

Governments raise taxes and make laws. Local government in Scotland in that sense goes back to the early burghs of the 12th Century. These burghs were largely planned and made, in the same way as say Glenrothes after the Second World War. A number of burghs were granted a monopoly of trade over their respective sheriffdoms. Burgh laws were separately regulated from other feudal law: from before 1292 through a Court of the Four Burghs and then from the middle of the 16th Century until the 20th century, the Convention of Royal Burghs. The latter was, however, more a caucus than a legislative body. As the Scottish state developed, burghs were given financial autonomy to raise central taxes as they saw fit; they could set local feu levels in return for sending a fixed sum to the Scottish exchequer. Aberdeen in 1319 was first followed by Berwick 1320 and Edinburgh 1329.

Representatives of Burghs attended the Scottish Parliament from 1366 but were only involved in the General Council of the Parliament from 1504, when discussing taxation, and fully in the General Council from 1567. By this time there were over 50 burghs regularly attending parliament. By 1672 there were 70 Royal Burghs with rights to conduct foreign trade, and around 270 burghs of barony, which could conduct internal trade. The poor law of 1579 gave an obligation on parishes and towns to provide for the poor largely through a system of rates roughly based on ability to pay, which remained in force for 300 years. The growth of industrialisation and trade had more effect on burghs than constitutional change following the union with England. Glasgow's tax revenue increased five-fold in the 17th Century and its constitution was changed to Glasgow Town Council to reflect the growing dominance of trade. Legally, however, burghs had control over most matters affecting trade within their jurisdiction and could raise taxes and make laws in relation to the conduct of their citizens as they saw fit. The regulation of foreign trade increasingly became the province of UK government law.

In the 19th century industrial expansion, Glasgow's ratepayers funded the bringing of clean water supply from Loch Katrine and built a new sewage system between 1850 and 1875. The Lands Valuation Act of 1854 established the valuation roll, which is still used to determine rateable value. City Improvement Acts in the 1860s created parks, refuse collection, new housing, supply of gas and fuel. Transport companies were set up. Local authorities provided when the private sector failed to do so. Smaller separate burghs such as Rutherglen joined the expanding Glasgow the better to coordinate services and resources. Local government structures evolved following the reform act of 1832 until in 1889 they were formalised with the creation of 33 County Councils which gained wide powers over police, roads and planning in areas outside the main cities. Increasingly Local Government services were seen as essential to the smooth running of the state and more responsibilities were passed to it from central government along with specific

grants from central government to run these services. The boundaries and roles of local government were again changed in 1947 to provide for counties, small burghs and large burghs. This period also saw a massive expansion of municipal housing. After a further lengthy period of review by Lord Wheatley, the 1974 reorganisation created two tiers of authority – regions and districts, each with separate responsibilities.

Regions and Districts

There is little doubt the regional councils were resented by district councillors as a diminution of their power and authority. Social work, education, roads, economic planning and transport became the responsibility of a separate authority leaving housing and cleansing the main responsibility of the districts. Regions did however have the planning power and geographical reach to redistribute resources towards poorer areas and adopted a more strategic style of governance. It is arguable that regions were at their most effective in the years immediately prior to their abolition. District councillors by contrast were more hands-on in dealing with housing and cleansing related issues and managing departments. As these were the issues with most direct impact on most people's daily lives, district councillors tended to be better known by the public.

Privatisation, deregulation and competitive tendering during the 1980s removed many powers from both regions and districts. This was allied to an increasingly stringent financial regime, which forced service cuts and tax rises. The then availability of European money allowed regions in the short term to safeguard some communities. It is also fair to say that the administration of local government became ever more efficient and cost effective and these improvements would have been more obvious had the Tories not forced the Poll Tax on Scotland. Whilst the prime target of the Tory Government was Livingstone's GLC, in Scotland it became Strathclyde Region and to a lesser degree Glasgow Council. Further education colleges were removed from regions in 1992 and set up as incorporated bodies. The regions themselves were then abolished. Michael Forsyth's reorganisation of 1995/96 unlike that instituted by the Wheatley report was not research driven; rather it was in the crudest possible sense driven by electoral considerations, a Gerrymander. The boundaries of East Renfrewshire as presented to Westminster included the addresses of individual houses presumed occupied by Tory voters. Glasgow in particular was stripped of its tax base despite having many of the most deprived communities in the UK, high levels of social exclusion as well as continuing to fund museums, cultural activities and entertainment routinely used by many from outside its boundaries.

Unitary Authorities

The immediate impact of reorganisation in 1996 was chaos. Instead of eight social work and education departments there were 32, each with directorates and other senior staff. Senior salaries rose inexorably. Former district councillors were

bemused by the sheer weight of attention required by the 'new' departments in what was largely seen as a district takeover. Even district services that had been shared on efficiency grounds across the region were brought in house with many tens of millions spent unnecessarily on new computer systems – often precluding common statistical information being collated across Scotland. An additional £100 million was required in 1996 to meet reorganisation costs.

Another effect of the loss of regions was the loss of strategic planning authorities. Current councils are too small to effectively play such a role and hence Scotland has moved out of step with most of Europe. There have been effectively turf wars between councils over matters such as the Braehead shopping complex, and supermarkets and other developers have generally been able to play councils against each other. Scottish Enterprise has inadequately taken over much economic planning and development from regions. The wars between councils extended to fighting over the distribution of grant aid. Indirectly this led to a split in COSLA with Glasgow leaving. In

effect Scottish Local Government ceased to have a united voice to negotiate with the government. The new Labour Government and the Scottish Executive compounded these problems by instituting Best Value regimes and performance targets to be monitored by the Audit Commission, ring fencing of expenditure, capital budgeting and stock transfer. The aim was to accelerate the shift to outsourcing and make Local authorities more 'accountable' to the Executive. This view of the Executive (often former councillors themselves) that local government needs a controlling hand has culminated in the trend for authorities to be brought effectively into 'administration' for poor performance in relation to targets set by the Executive and Audit Commission.

The consequence of these changes and in particular the removal of non domestic rates (business rates) from local

authorities is that whereas in 1988 50 per cent of local authority expenditure was raised locally, now 80 per cent of council expenditure is supplied directly from the executive and only 20 per cent raised locally. Thus if an authority wishes to increase its overall expenditure by one per cent it must raise taxes by five per cent. However, most local authority expenditure is predetermined by costs of essential services or ring fenced to be spent on Executive determined initiatives. Local authority chief executives reckon at most 10 per cent is discretionary expenditure and even there councils are expected to spend as the Executive wishes or they will fail performance targets. This is far from the goal of the European Charter of Local Self Government of "possessing a wide degree of autonomy with regard to their responsibilities, the ways and means by which those responsibilities are exercised and the resources required for their fulfilment".

Problems and Solutions

In the authors' view the following are the main problems preventing local authorities from acting as an effective

Local authority chief executives estimate councils have actual discretionary control over 10 per cent or less of the money they spend – the remainder is required to be spend on critical essential services or is ring-fenced by ministers.

democratic tier of government:

- 1) Local authority boundaries do not reflect the true economic and social catchment areas of the population. Furthermore there are too many authorities to act in any sense as strategic authorities.
- 2) The amount of tax raised locally is too low a proportion of local authority spend and too little of available expenditure is discretionary and not ring fenced.
- 3) Local authorities have no charter defining their powers and their decisions are in effect subject to being overruled at whim by the Executive.
- 4) Many decisions which affect local communities are taken by unelected bodies rather than a democratically elected council and many services properly controlled by local authorities have been outsourced, privatised, deregulated or removed from local authority control.

How Many Authorities?

Local authorities are free to merge or swap their boundaries by mutual agreement without further primary legislation. We believe there is a strong case for early action where this can be done by agreement such as the three Ayrshire authorities becoming one. There are however, likely to be cases where there is a strategic reason for merger yet the councillors and constituents can't agree. The most glaring example is Glasgow where most of East Renfrewshire, Rutherglen and Bearsden are in effect using Glasgow's shopping, cultural and infrastructure services yet don't contribute fiscally to the city. The Executive can argue that grants are equalised to account for this and is pressing councils to share services. It remains the case that there are too many councils to play an effective strategic role.

We believe that Scotland would best be served by between 12 and 15 authorities preferably the lower end. In most cases, these authorities boundaries will be self-evident – for example a single Lanarkshire council, a single Ayrshire council, a greater Glasgow council – and that amalgamations should be achievable without major service disruption. Combined with a reduced number of councils, we must address how we enhance local democracy and accountability at local community level and give communities devolved powers from councils. This is the subject of a separate article in this issue.

Finance

The amount of tax raised locally should be increased to around 50 per cent. In the UK local taxes amount to one per cent of GDP; the International average is four per cent. Contrary to the view of Professor Arthur Midwinter and Pat Watters of COSLA we do believe non-domestic rates should be localised so

that Councils set them locally to meet local circumstances and receive the income directly from these taxes. This would allow councils to raise 40 per cent of expenditure locally. The discretionary portion of available expenditure must be increased. In particular the Executive must cease ring fencing expenditure and setting arbitrary performance targets without full consultation with individual councils. If the Executive wishes to direct how services are delivered, then it must assume direct responsibility for the service delivery, make the service an Executive agency and allow the Minister to personally take the flack for non-performance. At present ministers make unreasonable edicts and blame councils for failure.

Councils should be free to institute such additional taxes as they see fit – congestion taxes, bed taxes on hotels, sales or turnover taxes, entertainment tax or parking taxes. The distribution of social security and benefits should be devolved to councils with councils able to integrate or modify benefits in line with community needs. Councils have recently been given the power

to in effect set up council enterprises or Scottish charitable Incorporated Organisations under the Charities Act. In theory these would be free to borrow money at significantly better rates than under Private Finance Initiative and avoid the loss of autonomy of Public Private Partnership schemes. The schemes would also in theory not impact on UK borrowing restrictions. In practise, there has been a lack of trust by the Executive and the need to appoint independent trustees regulated by the Charities commissioner may result in Councils viewing these as restrictive vehicles for their purposes or even the loss of community control over the organisations and hence service delivery. An open discussion is required as to how councils can deliver required services in new ways under community control without privatisation.

A Charter for Local Government

The Scottish Parliament should endorse the European Charter of Local Self Government and enter into a dialogue with incoming councils, COSLA and the trade unions so as to agree a protocol to determine the relation between the parliament and councils and in particular to identify areas over which councils have sole responsibility. The Parliament and the councils should endorse this. In

general councils must be free to act in the best interests of their constituents in all areas from which they are not explicitly excluded and where they are excluded or prohibited from action another tier of government must be clearly responsible. This is known as 'the power of general competence'. This clarity would also allow the Scottish Parliament to concentrate on the areas of policy and service affecting the Scottish people for which it is or should be democratically responsible.

We have a recipe for increased conflict between the Scottish Executive and the local authorities. The public increasingly feels alienated from many of the agencies of government. Unless a proper role is found for the largest group of directly elected politicians in Scotland, democracy as a whole will be undermined.

Increase Responsibilities and Powers for Councils

There are many areas of service delivery and strategic policy removed from councils over the past 30 years. Most recently the Executive for no good reason is trying to force councils to give up responsibility for housing. It is immoral to say money is available to write off debt but only if you change landlord. In other circumstances this would be deemed blackmail and a criminal offence and the Executive should say as much to the Exchequer and demand the money for councils voting to stick with the council as landlord.

The biggest change we would propose is to give councils full responsibility for the health, education and economic development of their communities. Health care delivery is a local issue and is closely linked to education, housing and social work services. Hospital, accident and emergency and other department closures affect everyone, yet no directly elected body takes responsibility. This despite well-supported, well-organised and rationally argued local opposition. The current system of appointing health boards gives a fig leaf to democratic accountability. Adopt the radical solution of the health service being run by local authorities with health committees involving staff, medical colleges and university representation as well as councillors. This would also avoid yet another expensive tier of elections as is being currently suggested in a Scottish Parliament Bill for the direct election of health board members and the confusion of responsibilities which would result.

Another consequence would be better use of council facilities. The Lyons review suggested that health boards should build clinics next to schools. Schools themselves are an underutilised community resource, which could include housing, social work, or colleges in the evenings. Local authority control of health and all education would give better asset utilisation of these resources. Economic development should largely be the responsibility of councils. Scottish Enterprise should be massively downsized and local enterprise committees abolished. Further education and careers services should be brought back under local authority control and integrated with other education services. Buses and road transport generally should be regulated and responsibility for local transport and non-strategic roads should pass to councils. There should be a single ticketing scheme at a Scottish level run in conjunction with local authorities. There are many other areas, particularly those run, as quangos, which we are certain incoming councillors will press the Executive to return to local democratic control.

Summary

Local Government is unviable and must change. We make the following proposals:

- a) The number of local authorities should be reduced to between 12 and 15. This should be done alongside enhanced local democracy at a community level.
- b) Councils should raise more of their expenditure locally. Non-domestic rates should be returned to council control and they should be free to raise additional local taxes as they see fit.
- c) Ring fencing of expenditure by the executive should be curtailed.

- d) Councils should have a power of general competence. They should be free to borrow for buildings/services and not forced to use more expensive, inflexible PFI/PPP schemes.
- e) A protocol setting out responsibilities and freedoms for local government in line with the European Charter should be negotiated and endorsed by the Parliament and councils.
- f) Councils should be given full responsibility for health, education and economic development in their areas.
- g) Further education colleges, the careers services and economic development agencies should be returned to councils. ■

For references please see full article on scottishleftreview.org

If the Executive wishes to direct how services are delivered, then it must assume direct responsibility for the service delivery, make the service an Executive agency and allow the Minister to personally take the flack for non-performance. At present ministers make unreasonable edicts and blame councils for failure.

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Bob Thomson was a senior trade union official and past chairman of the Scottish Joint Council for Local Authority Services He is an active member and former chairman and treasurer of the Scottish Labour Party.

you`ll have had your fiefdom then?

Former Labour councillor Steve Cardownie (now in the SNP) looks at the real effect the 2007 local elections will have on the dominant position of the Labour Party in Scotland

The election on May 3 2007 will be a watershed in Scottish politics. Leaving the Scottish Parliament election to one-side, it will be at local authority level that a political shift will be seen on an unprecedented level. One of the primary reasons for this is that the next local government elections will use the 'Single Transferable Vote' (STV) system instead of the 'First Past the Post' (FPTP) system that has been used to date.

Under the old system we had relatively small wards and each of those wards had just a single councillor. At the elections you voted for just one candidate by marking an 'x' in the appropriate box. From May the new system has wards that will elect either three or four councillors, and the wards are three to four times the size of the old wards to take account of this. When voting you rank the candidates in order of preference. This STV system is a 'proportional representation' (PR) system that should lead to the make-up of any given council mirroring a clearer representation of how the people voted.

Having a PR system for elections will not only produce a 'fairer' result but it will go a long way to smash party fiefdoms across the country. I was for many years both a member and a councillor for the Labour party and witnessed first hand how these fiefdoms operated elsewhere in the country and also closer to home here in Edinburgh. The most standard operation of these fiefdoms within the Labour party was for the sitting or aspirant councillor to load the local branch with family members to take over the running of the party locally. This created a problem for the internal democracy of the Labour party in many parts of the country. Any new or distrusted members would quickly be cut out of meetings and decision-making. 'Outsiders' were often simply not informed when meetings to select candidates and such were taking place. This often had the affect of driving away members and activists who were ostracised by those in control of the fiefdom. This driving away of ordinary members and activists from the Labour party coupled with the wards already being solid for the party meant that outside of a few weeks before election day the Labour Party simply didn't campaign as they felt they didn't have to. And there was no-one on the ground to do it for them anyway.

But with new STV wards being up to four times the size of the old ones there is no such thing as a ward being 'solid' for any one party. This has meant that neighbouring branches of the Labour Party which may have had little to do with each other in the past have been flung together to try and agree on their local candidates. This simple act of opening up the range of people who select the candidates has been enough to panic some of those who have enjoyed complete control of their local

In truth there are large sections of Scotland where the Labour Party simply doesn't know how to carry out an election campaign. They have existed for too long in an effective oligarchy and it has left the party sluggish and unable to effectively meet the changes that come with STV.

branch to literally take the money and run. For the forthcoming election this leaves Labour is something of a quandary. They witness their old fiefdoms being smashed by proportional representation and also have to wake up to the fact that they simply do not have the same number of bodies on the ground as the other parties. In truth there are large sections of Scotland where the Labour party simply doesn't know how to carry out an election campaign. They have existed for too long in an effective oligarchy and it has left the party sluggish and unable to effectively meet the changes that come with STV.

From my experience when it comes to pounding the streets the Lib Dems, Greens and my own party, the SNP, are far more adept and prepared for these elections than the Labour Party – despite the fact that they control the majority of councils in Scotland. In an effort to break up the fiefdoms under the old voting system the SNP has honed its campaigning and organisation to win at local government level. In the last few years the SNP winning council by-elections in former Labour strongholds has become a regular occurrence. By way of example in the recent Markinch and Woodside by-election in Fife the SNP's John Beare won with a swing to the SNP from Labour of around 30 per cent. We campaigned hard and listened to the people and Labour simply had no-one on the ground.

Being in control of most councils Labour also have the largest number of councillors in the country by some way. This has served not only to keep Labour representatives in visible positions of power, it has also provided the Labour party with a steady revenue stream. Not just from councillors putting their hand in their pocket from their council wages but also from Labour groups directing that a portion of the allowances from those in official positions be diverted to the party. I have previously held a number of positions on

Edinburgh council as part of the Labour administration and this was the party's practice at that time and still is to this day. The SNP, unlike Labour, does not direct funds from these special allowances to the party. Labour has depended on their councillors not just as the base for their campaigning organisation but also for finance; but with a dramatic reduction in the number of Labour councillors expected to be returning that level of finance and organisation is going to be hit hard.

It seems that there will be no corner of the country where there won't be a dramatic downturn in the number of Labour councillors. In Glasgow, where many had predicted it would be one of the few areas that they managed to hold on, there have been press reports of Labour trying to court the Lib Dems to form a coalition after the election as they fear they won't have a majority. Labour's fear of a collapse in their number of councillors, if not support, can be seen here in the Capital too. There is a pensive air of anticipation about Edinburgh City Chambers these days. There are some here who are seeking to move onward to the Scottish Parliament and more still that are choosing to walk away or who have been deselected. On Edinburgh Council Labour currently has 30 councillors to 28 opposition members, the slimmest of majorities.

The culture of the Labour party's oligarchy does not stop with the individual fiefdoms of some councillors but also extends to the leadership of the Labour groups. Individual councillors who may wish to express a dissenting view are seized upon and are forced into line by being told that any vote against the leadership's line on any issue will be construed as a vote against the leadership itself. The Labour leadership in Edinburgh, and in other parts of the country, has been quick to spot the opportunity that a loss in their numbers actually presents them. At the election in May Labour will be standing just 24 candidates here in the Capital, down six from the number of councillors they currently hold. Before a vote is even cast Labour's council numbers in Edinburgh will be reduced by a fifth. It is no coincidence that among the six sitting Labour councillors that have been deselected are those who have very occasionally voted against the leadership line and also just so happened to have voted against the current Labour group leader in recent elections. The problems that STV presents for Labour have of course been greeted as an opportunity by the other parties. Within the SNP the new system has been welcomed and is being campaigned on with gusto. There have been many areas of the country where the SNP has a sizeable vote but due to the outgoing electoral system have few councillors elected. The situation here in Edinburgh for the SNP is a case in point. Despite receiving around 16 per cent of the popular vote in the 2003 council elections the SNP had no councillors elected – a situation I rectified over a year ago.

In terms of organisation on the ground the move to STV does pose some challenges. The larger wards in themselves are not the major problem as all of the area would have had to have been

covered anyway. The real organisational problem is that the local elections and the Scottish Parliament elections are on the same day and the new wards and the parliamentary constituencies are not coterminous. There have been some who have complained that this lack of coterminous boundaries means that people won't be sure who their representative is. In truth the biggest problem that a party can really have is that they have to spend more time preparing leaflet-runs than they have in the past to ensure that the right material goes out in the right areas. I also think that we may begin to witness an attitudinal shift in how the parties interact with each other. In the past the FPTP system created a culture of 'winner takes all' and bitterness between parties that could border on the sectarian. STV being a proportional system will mean most, if not all, councils in Scotland will be run by either a coalition or a minority administration. No one party can force through an agenda without broader agreement. The age of consensus politics may finally be coming to Scottish local government.

Before a vote is even cast Labour's council numbers in Edinburgh will be reduced by a fifth.

Labour used to try and argue that coalitions made for unstable governance. Unsurprisingly this all stopped when they entered in coalition at Holyrood. They do though still try and maintain that STV is bad as someone having more than one councillor breaks the councillor-ward link. This is, of course, total bunkum. People seem

to get by perfectly well with having one MP, seven MEPs and eight MSP representing them. The only thing that STV breaks is the stranglehold that Labour holds over parts of this country. STV elections present the people of Scotland with a chance to have their views more clearly represented in the make-up of their councils. It presents parties like mine an opportunity show that there is a real alternative to the Labour oligarchy which has been dominant for so long. STV certainly presents the parties challenges with regard to the size of the ward and also boundaries, but this is a small price to pay in return for a fairer electoral system.



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where's the local-local?

Isobel Lindsay argues that Scotland faces a massive local democratic deficit when compared to any of our European neighbours and calls for a re-evaluation of what 'local' should mean

What aspect of Scottish governance is so far out of line with every other country in Europe that it is completely off the scale? Local government, of course. And the absurd situation we are in is that instead of modifying this extreme anomaly, the current discussion is about whether our position should be made even more extreme.

We have 32 elected statutory local authorities. Norway has 454. Sweden has 305. Denmark has 289. Austria has over 2,300. Tiny Iceland (with less than the population of Edinburgh) has 237. The Netherlands has 492. Finland has 454. France has over 36,000 (if France had the same ratio as us of councils to population, they would have around 500). Italy has 8,200. Even England has double the number of elected local councillors per head of population than Scotland.

Obviously there are wide variations in powers but even the smallest local authority unit in these countries has some functions, has status as part of the formal system of government, and is directly elected. The irony in Scotland is that despite the very small number of councils, this has not resulted in increasing the powers and discretion of local authorities but, if anything, the contrary. The new single transferable vote electoral system which will be operational in May, is very welcome in terms of proportionality but the downside is that the electoral wards are much larger and in many areas this may significantly reduce the link between community identity and elected representatives.

Public acceptance of the lack of a genuinely local dimension in much public decision-making in Scotland has been rather sullen and resigned; it is assumed that this is the way the world is. What the public does not realise is that it is not the way the world is - we are the exception. The political leadership doesn't seem to realise this either. While it may not have been articulated as such, part of the strong opposition to the centralisation of hospital services may also have been a focus for wider concerns about the decline of the local.

While the Wheatley Commission proposals that brought in the two-tier Region and District system in the mid 1970s involved a very radical reduction in local councils, it was also conscious of the gap in community representation arising from the reforms. They ruled out a statutory third level but proposed a stronger Community Council level than anything later implemented. As well as the representative role, they suggested that "...it should be possible for Community Councils to act as agents for District or Regional Authorities in the day-to-day running of certain local services or facilities." This is

a far cry from anything that actually happened. The present situation in Scotland is one of very remote 'local' government in most areas and an assortment of ineffective and confused arrangements that are supposed to bridge the gap. District Committees of councils are intended to introduce an element of decentralisation but, where they exist, the practice too often is that they are subject to central whipping by the dominant political group so that there is no feeling of genuine local engagement.

Community Councils have mainly a pressure group role that frequently turns their meetings into ginning sessions because they don't have positive work to undertake. Some are more pro-active and initiate activities within the limitations of the derisory resources they receive from their local authority but this is a minority. As long as they are seen as little more than another way of complaining to the local council (usually with no effect because the decisions have already been taken by the council executive), they are not going to attract people to stand for election or selection (in the case of local organisation representatives) or to vote in the few contested elections. 'Community Planning', now a requirement supposedly to involve local organisations, is unknown to the public and little known or understood by councillors or officials.

So over the past thirty years we have failed to develop a local government system that gives some kind of active statutory role to local communities. And instead of a debate on this other democratic deficit, the only current debate is whether local authorities should become larger and whether they should be given a little more or less discretion.

Why has Scotland ended up in this extremely anomalous position? Largely because the changes and the debates over the period were driven by technocratic assumptions (in practice often pseudo-technocratic assumptions). Issues of representation, identity and development of community dynamic have been regarded as marginal. Some elements of the Michael Forsyth reforms in the mid 1990s were also driven by a desire to reduce anything that was public sector and to gerrymander some local council boundaries in the hope that the Tories would then succeed in controlling a few councils.

The reasons why much of the push for large units was pseudo-technocratic was because the evidence from the Wheatley Commission in the late 1960s to the present is far from supporting the case that effectiveness in service delivery correlates to the largest unit size. This is especially true in relation to the more personal services like education,

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social work, housing and recreation. Some small authorities do, and did in the past, perform well and some large authorities perform well. Similarly with poor performance. After taking into account social demographic factors, it is likely that the quality of chief officers and leading councillors would show up as more significant than the size of the authority. The principal reasons for arguing for economies of scale relate to the provision of very specialist aspects of services such as a special advisor on language education or aspects of educational psychology. The delivery of most routine services such as primary and secondary education, elderly care and housing do not offer up and strong evidence in favour of economies of scale. But it is exactly this type of routine service delivery that most of the public are involved with and interested in. Specialist services are easy to buy in from other authorities or agencies. There may be strong arguments for scale economies in some of the infrastructure services but co-operation can cover this without the need to impose excessively large units for the delivery of many of the most important personal services.

Apart from the arguments around economies of scale, the other major factor explaining Scotland's local authority structure has been the convenience for central executive control. The push for local government reform in the 1960s did not come from the public nor from the political parties nor from pressure groups; it came from the senior civil servants at the Scottish Office who had to work with an untidy system of over 400 units (interestingly that is similar in number to the current systems in European countries of similar size) with a highly

varied distribution of powers. They wanted a much smaller number of units and a greater standardisation of powers. One of the theories that the Wheatley Commission supported was that larger units would enable local authorities to take on more powers and reduce much of the more detailed control over them. That was not the outcome. The present media lobbying that has been going on to prepare the way for yet further reductions in our tiny number of councils may have a definite agenda behind it or it may simply be a threat in order to get certain policies accepted. Yet again it is not coming from the public nor from the parties nor from voluntary organisations (although the CBI may be supportive). It is coming, as in the past, from the Scottish Executive.

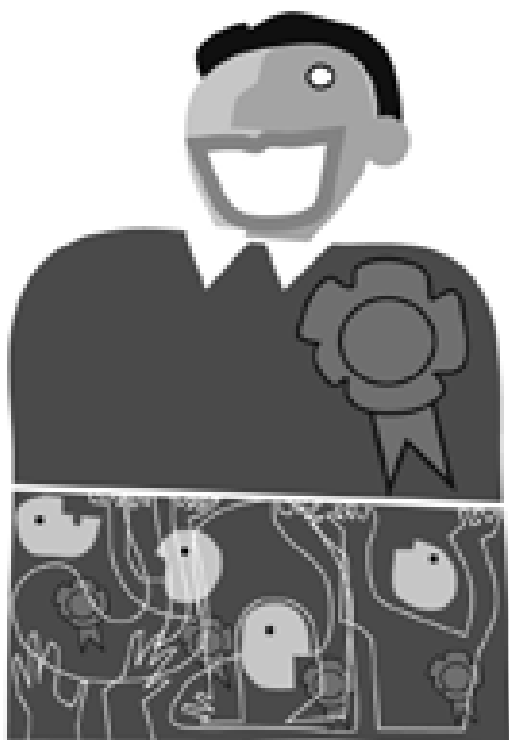
The present media lobbying that has been going on to prepare the way for yet further reductions in our tiny number of councils may have a definite agenda but it is not coming from the public nor from the parties nor from voluntary organisations (although the CBI may be supportive). It is coming, as in the past, from the Scottish Executive civil servants.

The debate we should be having in Scotland is not whether we make units bigger but whether we make units smaller and/or whether we introduce a statutory Community Council level with some powers and resources. We have to accept that the prospect of another substantial reorganisation of local government will understandably be regarded by those directly involved as something to be strenuously avoided. The past two reorganisations involved serious disruption for staff and public and there are always substantial costs in change.

However, if there is to be change, the case for smaller not larger units needs to be promoted. A feasible, low-cost option might be to have a programme of disaggregation of larger councils that have little community coherence like North and South Lanarkshire. The prospect of joint committees for some services, including Health, is less disadvantageous than local government units that have little relationship to actual locality. We already have these committees for Police and Fire.

But whatever adaptations are made to the present structure of Scottish local government, there needs to be a serious discussion on what should happen at the most local level. We need to look at what the smallest local authority units do in other countries. We should be working on a statutory Community Council scheme. A non-statutory approach and a lack of any resources or positive functions has not worked. We can have a statutory scheme covering all geographical areas with a mix of directly elected individuals and local organisation representatives. With the knowledge that all areas will be covered, these can be the principal consultative bodies for Community Planning and they can be given administrative support in kind by the larger authorities. They can also be given a small budget for local recreation and amenities. A more significant role will encourage more people to take part. Any political party taking up these issues of local-local government might be surprised at how positive the public response is.

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can local tax ever be fair?

Mark Ballard and Peter McColl look at the Burt Review of Local Government Finance and discuss what needs to be done to make local taxation fairer

The Burt Review into Local Government Finance may have received the swiftest (and possibly least justified) slap-down from a minister. What in the report could have provoked such a rapid rebuke?

The Review was set up as part of the Partnership agreement between Labour and the Liberal Democrats. The Liberal Democrats had fought the 2003 election with a commitment to replace the Council Tax with a Local Income Tax. This is based on the argument that the Council Tax is unfair, being based partly on property and partly as a service charge. Labour see there being no problem in principle with the Council Tax, but have argued that there may need to be additional bands, and a re-gearing of the bands. This would mean those in higher bands paying proportionately more.

The review was intended to satiate Liberal Democrat activists who wanted action to introduce a Local Income Tax, while not changing Labour policy which is to retain the Council Tax – while accepting that there may be ways to charge more fairly.

The current tax, the Council Tax, is a combination of a poll tax and a property tax. It is levied half on the basis of property ratings at 1990 values and half on the basis of a charge to pay for local services. This maintains elements of both the systems that preceded it – rates and the poll tax. The Rates System was replaced because funding local services through a tax based on property values was deemed to be unfair. The Poll Tax (or Community Charge), conversely was levied on individuals, removing any link to wealth. While there had been much contention about rates, the Poll Tax prompted a popular revolt that led to the fall of the then Prime Minister.

More than 15 years on from the introduction of the Council Tax, attention has turned to how it is unfair. Dissatisfaction with the tax seems to be driven largely by the relatively rapid increase forced by the redistribution of tax take by HM Treasury from centrally collected taxes, combined with increased obligation for Local Authorities to spend on services like education. The reduced increase in block grant from central government meant that to pay for smaller class sizes, school refurbishment and the rise in wages for local authority staff the proportion of income raised directly had to rise.

The review's recommendation was a tax on property values. This would mean that the tax would be levied according to the market value of the property. So, if this were set at 1 per cent per annum, the residents would have to pay 1 per cent of the property's value every year as local taxation. In order to meet the current £22bn raised in local taxation the review group suggested a 1 per cent levy – based on the last available valuation of property – that for the council tax in 1990.

This produced a storm of political, media and popular outrage as critics rushed to ridicule such an apparent rise in tax. Given that the review was commissioned to replace existing levels of tax, it seems the critics were rather more concerned with attacking the proposal than with a balanced critique of its findings. Why was this?

The answer lies partly in the desire to build a political consensus around the local income tax, and partly in a hasty assessment of the political climate by the four largest parties. Local income tax

has three main benefits. It is, firstly, understood by the electorate and by tax-payers. It also appears to be more socially just than the current situation. Finally, it taxes revenue, rather than any other source of wealth.

This, however, has several problems. These are recognised by the Burt Review, which outlines objections as follows (A Fairer Way, p. 2):

- The tax base should be as broad as possible. Around one-third of UK tax receipts already come from UK income tax
- Wealth, as well as income, should be taxed.
- Additional income tax is a disincentive to work, which is economically undesirable.
- Yield would be more volatile than under a property tax; and
- A local income tax would be 'fair' only if it was levied on all income but it would be extremely complex to do so. A tax that applied only to earned income would arguably not be 'fair'.

What this means is that there are two orders of criticism of the local income tax: principled and practical. Practically, it seems that the local income tax would be difficult to implement, and hard to collect. However, the key criticisms are the principled ones. The principled objections centre on the analysis that removing all elements of property

More than 15 years on from the introduction of the Council Tax, attention has turned to how it is unfair. Dissatisfaction with the tax seems to be driven largely by the relatively rapid increase forced by the redistribution of tax take by HM Treasury from centrally collected taxes, combined with increased obligation for Local Authorities to spend on services like education.

tax, as proposed by SNP and Lib Dems, would privilege those who have wealth in the form of property. This wealth would then become free from taxation. It is profoundly un-progressive, and against the aims of the left, to leave particular elements of wealth untaxed. While almost all dual income households would be hammered by the report's suggested 6 per cent rise in income tax, while wealthy landowners would pay nothing if they declare their earnings off shore. The removal of the property element of tax take would also likely fuel house price inflation, and act as a disincentive to work.

Greens support a land value tax. Land values are the value of a property that comes in addition to, for example, the bricks and mortar cost of a house. They are usually caused by the property being in a particularly attractive, well-served, convenient or otherwise beneficial area and by the planning permission granted to a location. Land value arises because of the provision of public services and the general economic activity of the community. The land value of a location is community-created. Land value is not created by property owners who should therefore not benefit from it when it becomes incorporated in higher capital or rental values.

Generally, taxpayers owning valuable prime city-centre locations will tend to pay more, and owners of less-valuable marginal locations, in rundown urban locations as well as in the countryside, especially the highlands, will pay less, substantially less in some cases. Owners of valuable sites at the hub of cities, for which there is great competition to enjoy their amenity and advantages, will compensate the rest of society for their privileges, by paying relatively more. Sites at the periphery, where economic activity is marginal and disadvantaged, will be assisted in being improved and developed by a reduced tax burden. Winners will include owners who make best use of their locations, within the existing planning and environmental regulation framework. They will pay a relatively lower Bill in comparison to those whose sites are derelict or under-developed.

With a local tax based on land values, there is no possibility for avoidance or evasion, as land cannot be hidden, moved or relocated to a tax haven. It cannot be avoided because the land is physically tied to its location. While there would be the expected initial costs involved in reforming the system, the tax intrinsically would be relatively cheap and easy to administer. However, a dynamic system would have to be developed to regularly reassess the land values.

The Burt review suggests a "radical alternative [form of local taxation] is required." They recommend "a new progressive Local Property Tax (LPT) be introduced, based on the capital value of individual properties and payable by households occupying properties (whether as owner-occupiers or as tenants) and by owners of second homes and unoccupied properties" (ibid, p.3).

This would resemble the old rates system, in that it would tax property on its market value. This has opportunities and costs. It removes the link to paying for services that comprised the total

poll tax and a notional half of the Council Tax. It also creates a disincentive to improve the capital value of property. However, the reinstatement of a link between wealth as constituted in property value, and taxation is welcome.

Land Value Tax would not notionally reflect the value of a property. After all, it is counterproductive to penalise these values, as we do at present, when you improve your home, or grow your business. Under Land Value Tax a surveyor will assess the value of the land occupied, on the basis of the planning permission granted and its location. Therefore the bill will directly reflect the value placed on all the services your location receives, as expressed by the land market, and as already implicitly agreed to by the occupant, through occupancy of the site and the paying of market cost to do so.

Land Value Tax would widen the tax base and make tax avoidance and evasion very difficult. Neither the present council tax nor a local income tax can do anything to address the problem of millions of homes lying empty while families languish in temporary accommodation and people sleep rough. Land value taxation would mean owners of unused housing would face an immediate incentive to bring their property back into use, and would help to stabilise house price inflation.

The main losers under Land Value Tax, and indeed Local Property Tax, are those whose assets are relatively concentrated in property, rather than income. The rush to local income tax seems to be centred on pandering to people whose wealth is held in this way. The costs of removing taxation from property, however, will be felt by someone, and it is clear that not only is a local income tax impractical, it is also likely to shift the tax burden onto those who are income-rich, but property poor.

The Burt review suggests that its proposed system would primarily benefit those living in homes banded A, B and C for the Council Tax. A Land Value Tax is likely to have similar benefits – and such benefits would clearly create both the sort of redistribution of wealth and the reallocation of housing supply that are desperately needed in Scotland today. ■

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Peter McColl works as a researcher to Mark Ballard MSP. He has a degree in Geography and a MSc in politics of community land ownership.

ending the college folly

Joe Eyre catalogues the failures in management, industrial relations, finance and strategic outlook which have resulted from removing further education from local authority control and calls for a policy reversal

From the 1940s onwards Scottish local authorities established further education colleges to expand and enhance the quality of vocational education and improve the skill base of the national workforce. Successive governments supported this expansion as did employers and the local authority grant was augmented to fund new colleges thus integrating vocational education into the public education system provided by the local authorities. College councils were set up to oversee the work of each college and local employers were represented on the college councils by right, as were the local authority, the college staff, trade unions and students. Where necessary, colleges would establish new training courses at short notice in response to new training needs or to structural changes in the economy that required a programme of retraining for workers in declining industries, such as shipbuilding, heavy engineering or mining. Employers used the new training opportunities provided by the colleges extensively to assist with continuing training of their workforce. In particular, apprentices were sent to college on a day release or block release basis. By the early 1990s there were 44 local authority further education colleges in Scotland.

In 1992, the government brought forward legislation to remove the colleges from local authority control and establish them as incorporated bodies funded directly by central government. No serious educational arguments were put forward to justify this new arrangement. Rather, ideological arguments and assertions were used such as that incorporation would remove the dead hand of local government bureaucracy, give the colleges more freedom to make their own decisions and thereby encourage greater flexibility and efficiency.

The real reason for the removal of the colleges from local authority control was the government's desire to appear to reduce local authority expenditure. In the early 1990s a widespread movement had developed in opposition to the Poll Tax with widespread refusal to pay and street disturbances. The government wanted to reduce local authority spending in order that Poll Tax bills could be capped or reduced. Local authority spending on the colleges was roughly at the level that the government calculated it needed to reduce Poll Tax bills so it decided to fund the colleges directly by central government and reduce Poll Tax bills. The ideological aims of the government were reflected in the composition of the new boards of management which were established to run the incorporated colleges; at least half the members had to be representatives of business or the professions while local authorities, local communities and the voluntary sector had no right of representation and the representation of college staff and students was halved from the level that had applied on college councils. The government imposed a market model on the further education sector. Each college was to see itself in competition with every other college and was instructed to prosper or fail in the new vocational education market.

The new system was costly. Prior to incorporation local authorities had provided central services to the colleges such

as human resources and payroll, legal services and estate management. After incorporation each college had to provide these services itself, or buy them in at significant cost and plan its own budget etc.. In consequence, for example, each college has its own highly paid Human Resource Manager. In addition however, almost every college now has at several senior managers who, although classed as academic staff, don't undertake any classroom teaching. This is in contrast with schools, where only the head teachers are exempt from a regular timetable, and higher education institutions where most professors teach classes. College principals and other senior managers received unwarranted payments and perks (some in breach of Treasury rules) despite the very tight budgets imposed by central government. The pay of some Principals has as much as doubled over the past 10 years. Almost every principal was given an expensive car immediately after incorporation, an unheard of perk under the local authorities. There have been frequent trips abroad by senior staff (for example to China) with no tangible benefits to the college or the local community.

There has been a significant increase in the number of students attending further education, but there has been no corresponding increase in teaching staff. This problem has been compounded by an increase in managers who do not teach. In Clydebank College the number of managerial and support staff is broadly equivalent to the number of teaching staff. Staffing levels were cut to the extent that staff absences could not be covered and the classes of absent teachers were left untaught. The first compulsory redundancies in the public education service since 1945 have been imposed in colleges throughout the country. Trade union organisation was undermined in an unprecedented way (in some colleges the teaching trade union has been derecognised) and in at least twelve colleges trade union branch officers have been made redundant, dismissed or otherwise forced out. In James Watt College both the main EIS officers were forced out at a cost to the college (which is to say taxpayers) of at least £250,000.

Only in one high profile case have colleges actions been successfully challenged. Jim O'Donovan was President of the EIS College Lecturers Association and worked at Central College of Commerce in Glasgow. For no reason other than being an active trade unionist he was summarily sacked by the College. Following an Industrial Tribunal, which was inordinately protracted due to deliberate tactics by the college, Jim was finally reinstated two and a half years after being sacked. The tribunal found he had been illegally sacked for carrying out normal trade union activity. The cost to the college of Jim's salary over that period was over £100,000. In addition thousands of hours of management staff time were spent preparing their so-called case. A large legal team was employed by the college and finally a QC. It has not as yet been possible to determine the full legal costs. A review into the sacking was jointly commissioned by the Funding Council and the Central College Board of Management. This in no uncertain terms condemned

the procedure by which O'Donovan was sacked. It was noted that the College did not fully cooperate with the review. Despite this the College Principal and Human Resources Manager are still in post. Hundreds of thousands of pounds of taxpayers cash has been spent on legal fees to attempt to sack workers at a time when managements have in many cases been proven to be acting illegally or with gross financial mismanagement.

West Lothian and Inverness colleges are effectively bankrupt. In West Lothian's case it is clearly a result of a PFI scheme which went wrong and funding cannot keep up with the required payments. James Watt College had been seen as the college to flourish most under incorporation. It entered into its own arrangements for funding a building programme out of annual income with no special grants from the Executive. Suddenly, almost overnight, it found itself in a position of having to save £2 million due to 'unforeseen' costs. It handed out 90 day notices to all its staff. Due to a campaign by college staff and the local community these notices were withdrawn but redundancy remains an issue. The Principal is on long term sick leave. However, many people believe the whole panic was simply a ploy to force through major changes in staff conditions of service.

In 2003 there was a plan to provide a city centre college campus in Glasgow based on a merger between the College of Building and Printing, Food Technology College and Central College of Commerce. After two years and just before signing, Central College pulled out. Negotiations had cost around £1 million. In a new model the other two colleges merged to form Glasgow Metropolitan College. A new model being proposed involves merger of Metropolitan, Central, Stow and Nautical colleges to create a £200 million state of the art 'super college' in the centre of Glasgow. Despite successive efforts this project is no further forward, the stumbling block being the principals who won't agree on anything if it threatens their positions of power. Given autonomous boards, no one can force the issue.

Most recently, Central College rejected a special purposes vehicle which would have allowed the four colleges to jointly enter into contracts to build the new college and refused to give up its land to the project, offering to rent it out to the other colleges. Meanwhile, Nautical College pulled out of the whole deal as it wanted 25 per cent of the merged college to be based on the Clyde. Despite this, the Scottish Funding Council (the quango which funds colleges) has told the other colleges to proceed on the basis that Nautical will be involved. Former MEP Bill Miller was appointed to try and help the four colleges reach agreement that would allow the new college to go ahead. However, despite his best efforts, the self interest of the principals prevailed and no real progress was made. Essentially, a £200 million educational project supported by local authorities, the Funding Council, the Scottish Executive and which would, with guarantees over jobs and conditions, have union support, is being blocked by four principals. Under Local Authority control of further education

this ludicrous situation could not have arisen.

There have also been serious educational implications. To attract more funding class sizes were increased substantially, leaving lecturers unable to provide the level of individual attention that students require. Students are regularly denied the time in class recommended by the Scottish Qualifications Authority for all its courses. Instead of being taught, students are sent on what is euphemistically termed 'directed study' which is not supervised at all, or supervised only very lightly.

Without reference to the local communities they should be serving, boards of management have often cut courses in skill areas that benefit the local area. Craft courses were often regarded as too expensive to run since they require workshops, kitchens or salons as well as classrooms. They also use up expensive consumable materials and require additional staffing to fulfil health and safety requirements. Judging such courses on a financial, rather than an educational and training basis, has resulted in cuts that have contributed significantly to the present skills shortage in areas like construction, manufacturing, transport and even the hospitality sector. An increasing number of pupils aged 14 to 16 are going to colleges as well as school. The level of child protection which exists in schools is not currently present in colleges. This inconsistency would be much easier to address were the colleges run by the same bodies which manage the schools.

Further education colleges are an integral part of the country's public education provision and yet the taxpayers and their elected representatives in the Parliament or local authorities have little or no influence over how public money is spent by college boards of management

Further education colleges are an integral part of the country's public education provision and yet the taxpayers and their elected representatives in the Parliament or local authorities have little or no influence over how public money is spent by college boards of management. College boards of management are unelected and unrepresentative. The Funding Council, which allocates public funds to the colleges and lays down guidelines for their operation is itself unelected and operates at arms length from the Executive. It does not have the power to directly intervene in the colleges. The minister has already indicated his wish to give up his power - under

the 1992 Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act - to directly intervene in individual colleges where serious failures have occurred.

There is a serious democratic deficit in relation to the operation of Scotland's further education colleges. The left must demand the return of the colleges to clear and democratic public accountability under local authority control. Colleges must be integrated into the council's education, community education and economic development provision with funding transferring to the council and college boards, like school boards should reflect the entire community including staff and student representatives and specialists. Investment and education decisions would then be taken on behalf of the whole of the local community. ■

Joe Eyre is a former president of the EIS Further Education Lecturers Association

celtic tiger/celtic kitten

Donald Adamson compares the economic performance of Scotland and Ireland and concludes that Scotland needs to end its dependency on England

When Gordon Brown in his recent 'Britishness' speech in Edinburgh announced to his audience that "Scottish growth rates are in line with the UK again this year" it may have been good politics but it was not good economics. The Scottish Executive, in its Economic Report of June 2006 was less disingenuous, stating that, "The closure of the growth gap between the UK and Scotland in 2005 was primarily a result of a slowdown in the UK economy rather than an increase in Scottish growth." Brown was referring to 2005 and the projection for 2006. Throughout the period 1997 to 2004 however, Scottish growth was around 1 per cent lower than the UK's as it has been more or less since the mid-1970s.

Any serious discussion of the Scottish economy would need to analyse the reasons why this period was the turning-point in Scotland's embedded economic underperformance for the next 30 years but that lies beyond the scope of this article. We can however throw some light upon it by comparing some features of the Scottish and Irish economies over the last decade.

One of the popular myths about Ireland's remarkable economic growth since the 1990s is that much of it is attributable to EU subsidies. If this were true, Ireland really would have performed an economic 'miracle' in this period! But as the **Economist** put it, in a survey of the Irish economy in October 2004: "The most authoritative studies suggest that EU subsidies may have added around 0.5 per cent a year to Ireland's growth during the 1990s – useful but modest in the context of average growth of 6.9 per cent." It's not difficult to identify some of the main reasons for Ireland's improved performance in the last ten years, they include: an impressive increase in Irish exports; sustained production led growth; the EU's single market and single currency; and the huge increase in employment.

Since the early 1990s Ireland has quadrupled its volume of exports to the EU. If we compare the destination of Ireland's and Scotland's exports we can identify one of the reasons why the Scottish economy has been underperforming so consistently over the last decade. According to the Executive, in 2004 63 per cent of Scotland's exports were to England, 17 per cent to the EU, 6.5 per cent to the US and 13.5 per cent to the rest of the world. Ireland by contrast, in 2005, supplied 46 per cent of its exports to the EU, 19 per cent to the US, 17 per cent to the UK and 18 per cent to the rest of the world.

Impressive as Ireland's export performance has been it's also worth noting that in 2005 Finland provided 57 per cent of its exports to the EU, Sweden 70 per cent and Norway 79 per cent. Future economic historians in Scotland, perhaps mindful of Brown's warning in his speech about the economic consequences of Scottish independence, may not appreciate the irony of the relative export performance that saw Ireland, in 2005, earn more from its annual exports to the UK (€15.4 billion) than Scotland, in 2004, earned from its annual exports to the entire EU (£8.8 billion).

One of the long-standing structural problems in the Scottish

economy has been its narrow export-orientation. Scotland has been over-reliant on the relatively small UK market in a period when European enlargement, in all its forms since 1973, should have provided opportunities for Scotland to significantly increase its exports to the EU. Even the Executive acknowledges that, "The strength of the economic linkages between Scotland and the rest of the UK implies that the performance of the wider UK economy bears significantly on the performance of the Scottish economy." This, if anything, is an understatement. But to see why Scotland's over-reliance on the UK will intensify the difficulties for the Scottish economy over the next business cycle, if not beyond, we need to look at recent developments in the UK economy.

One of the disturbing recent trends, particularly in England's economy over the last decade, has been the huge increase in consumer indebtedness. When New Labour came to power in 1997, the UK mortgage debt to GDP ratio was just under 50 per cent. By 2004, it had increased to 79 per cent (the EU average in 2004 was 45 per cent). Further, since 1997 the UK level of personal consumer indebtedness (credit card debt, personal bank loans etc) has increased 300 per cent. Today, one third of the entire EU's unsecured consumer debt is held in the UK, most of it in England.

The engine of growth here has been house price inflation. Since 1997 the UK, or rather the south-east of England, has had the highest house price inflation in the EU. According to the Executive, throughout the period 1997 to 2004 property prices in London were two and a half times greater than in Scotland. House price inflation has produced the recent phenomenon in England of large-scale 'equity withdrawal.' As a consequence of so-called 'wealth effects' owner occupiers, in anticipation of rising house prices, have been withdrawing 'equity' i.e. borrowing money on the rising value of their property. Inevitably this house price bubble will burst in England. And as we saw in the late 1980's, when levels of indebtedness were considerably lower and less extensive than today, when this happens the consequences for the Scottish economy, which depends on England for 63 per cent of its exports, will be potentially devastating. The other problem with debt-laden consumption led growth is that consumption spending becomes highly sensitive to interest rate increases.

Ireland meanwhile has continued its impressive growth. Since joining the Eurozone in 1999, Irish interest rates have been around 1.5 per cent lower than those in Scotland and this during a period when Ireland's economy has been growing four times faster than Scotland's! Unlike the UK, much of Ireland's growth over the last decade has been production led. This has had a more significant and sustainable impact on the real economy in Ireland - for example, on increased consumption spending related to increases in income rather than debt, on investment, export performance and so on. Indeed Ireland is now the second most productive economy in the EU.

In October 2005, the OECD compiled a 'league' table of the productivity and skills in developing countries. The UK was

in the bottom half of this table. Of course, there has been a productivity (and skills) gap between the UK and other advanced capitalist economies since the 1950s. But one of the reasons that the UK has been unable to close this gap is because of the role of the city of London in attracting finance capital that might otherwise be put to productive use in the real economy.

Like previous UK chancellors, Brown has supported a 'strong' pound as a kind of national virility symbol. A recent report by Goldman Sachs estimates that since Brown became chancellor sterling has been overvalued by 12 per cent with inevitable consequences for manufacturing exports. Scotland, for example, has lost over 100,000 manufacturing jobs since 1999 - the official explanation for this is 'globalisation'. But as the Bank of England's last Quarterly Bulletin put it: "A major determinant of demand for an industry's exports is the price of those exports relative to the prices of international competitors". And a 'strong' pound, although it has increased the business and profits of the city of London, has priced Scottish manufacturing exports out of international markets.

The desire to retain the 'independence' of sterling and the city of London's dominance as an international financial centre was also one of the primary reasons behind Brown's decision not to take sterling into the euro. The so-called 'five tests' to take sterling into the euro are in fact largely bogus, not only because they are so subjective but also because everyone knows that it is the so-called 'sixth test' i.e. could Brown win a referendum to take sterling into the euro, that really determined the decision. Having said this, the Treasury's 2003 **EMU Study** ought to be read by all Scots as it provides many compelling reasons why smaller countries like Scotland would benefit from monetary union. These reasons were not lost on the Irish. In the debate on whether Ireland should join the euro, an editorial in the **Irish Times** in March 1998 argued that failure to join would be tantamount to, "Ireland reclassifying itself, effectively, as a UK dependency."

It might be thought that on employment Scotland has a record over the last nine years that compares favourably with Ireland. Unfortunately this is not the case. According to the Executive, between 1999 and the first quarter of 2006, 183,000 new jobs were created in Scotland. Of these, 59,000 were in the public sector and 124,000 in the private sector. In Ireland, between 1997 and 2005, 435,000 new jobs were created, 62,000 in the public sector and 373,000 in the private sector. Indeed, if the relative employment growth patterns of the last decade continue then, by 2015, Ireland's employed labour force would be larger than Scotland's. This would be an astonishing turnaround as it's little more than a decade ago that Scotland's employed labour force was **double** that of Ireland's.

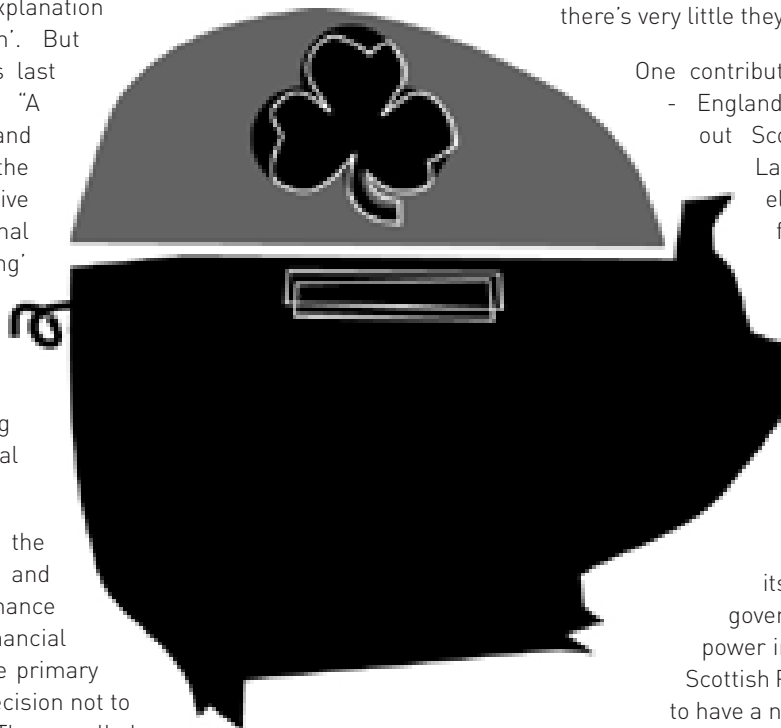
Much of the recent debate about Scotland's continuing economic underperformance has focused on the 'crowding out' thesis. The central argument of this thesis is that 'unproductive' public investment has crowded out 'productive' private investment in the UK. But to fall back on this thesis as an explanation for Scotland's chronic underperformance is, at best, a distraction from a bigger picture. The reason that neither Scotland's public nor private sectors can emulate the performance of Ireland and other smaller EU economies, isn't because the public sector crowds out the private sector but because England's economy crowds out the Scottish economy. This doesn't happen by design - no one at the UK Treasury wants to see Scotland continue to lag behind other comparable countries in Europe, but there's very little they can do to prevent it.

One contributory factor here is political - England's electoral cycle crowds out Scotland's also. Since 1964, Labour has won every general election in Scotland, yet for 21 of the last 42 years Scotland has been governed by the Conservatives. If, as seems increasingly likely, David Cameron's Tories win the next UK general election it's not clear that Scotland is prepared for the prospect of a rejuvenated Tory party anxious to flex its neo-liberal muscles in government. Whoever wins power in next May's elections to the Scottish Parliament, we urgently need to have a national debate in Scotland to produce clear policy objectives that will address and resolve some of Scotland's main economic problems.

First, how can we adopt fiscal and monetary policies that are more closely correlated to the real economy in Scotland? Second, how can we create sustainable production led growth? Third, how can we improve Scotland's dismal export performance with the EU and the rest of the world? Fourth, how can we transform Scotland from a low wage to a high wage economy in the EU? Fifth, how can we ensure that no worker in Scotland works for poverty wages (i.e. a minimum wage worth no less than 60 per cent of average earnings not, as at present, 40 per cent)? Sixth, how can we address the growing imbalance in housing tenure and nullify its effects on increasing inequality as well as on the wider economy? Finally, how can we sustain stable and growing investment in Scotland's public and private sectors?

Debates are more effective when the participants have a specific question to consider. There are many economic issues competing for attention in Scotland today. But there is one political question that needs to be addressed first: What will you do if David Cameron's Tories are elected into government in 2009? It may be stating the obvious but it would not be in Scotland's interests to leave this debate until 2010.

Donald Adamson is a lecturer in economics and politics at Cambridge University



the politics of world debt

Moctar Coulibaly and Ben Young discuss the problems around debt relief from Western institutions and conclude that despite the problems, there is hope

In November 2005 Moctar Coulibaly, President of the Malian voluntary campaigning body AMADIP (Association Malienne pour Le Développement Intégré et Participatif), visited Scotland as a guest of Jubilee Scotland. This conversation took place between Moctar and Jubilee Scotland's Ben Young as they waited in Edinburgh Airport for Moctar's return flight to Mali, 5AM (edited and translated from French by Ben Young).

Ben Young: We've been all over Scotland in the last two weeks, and it was your first time in Europe. What are your impressions?

Moctar Coulibaly [pauses]: There are so many things to say. Think of the level of development: there's just no comparison between here and Mali; the school hall where we spoke to students in Fortrose, for example: even the National Assembly in Mali doesn't have a hall like that. But what really struck me was the passion of campaigners. You have comfortable lives, but still so many stand up against injustice and impoverishment in Africa. This touched me very deeply.

BY: Some say that campaigners are getting tired, they think: "that's ten years that we've been fighting for debt relief, and we've seen no real results." Did you notice signs of this?

MC: My feeling was that the social movement here is growing stronger - just like in Africa, and around the world. I wanted to

encourage you as much as I could: I know that you must be tired, but still I want you to carry on - in fact I want you to double your efforts! [laughs] This is a crucial time for the social movement. It is reaching out beyond the activists who have always been involved, and touching the lives of people who are normally not political. Take the World Social Forum, for example, which was held in Mali, January 2006; we had 20,000 participants, including 10,000 peasants from around the various regions of Mali. It is a real sign

of progress when ordinary people ask themselves: how is neoliberal economics keeping me poor?

BY: I think that was the best thing about Make Poverty History in 2005: it made many people think for the first time about global power and inequality.

MC: That's true, though remember that citizens in the North and citizens in the South have different roles to play. In the North you are close to power: it is you yourselves who fund the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, whose policies have such a terrible impact in the South. You are the ones who can take action to reform them, but it is us in the South who know what these policies really mean. We have the information, and you can take effective action: that's why international solidarity is so important.

BY: But is it true that we are seeking no result from these campaigns?

MC: There have already been results. If it wasn't for campaigns like Jubilee 2000, we wouldn't even be talking about debt relief and debt cancellation today.

BY: But what about concrete results? What actual differences does debt cancellation make in Mali?

MC: Before I left for Scotland I went to the Office of Public Debt Management in Mali - that's the government office that works on all things to do with debt. I know the Assistant Director, and I asked him what was happening with the debt cancellation promised by the G8 in 2005.

BY: That's the "MDRI", the Multilateral Debt Relief Initiative.

MC: That's the one. He said that since July 1st 2006 Mali had been receiving debt relief under this scheme, but he wasn't able to tell me **anything** about how much money was coming, or to what use it was being put. Basically, the scheme is too new for us to be able to say much about it.

BY: We can work it out roughly, though. The MDRI cancels all the debts owed to the World Bank, IMF and African Development Fund for nineteen countries, of which fifteen are in Africa. The African countries tend to owe over half of their debt to the multilateral lending agencies, so they ought to see their debts cut in two - sometimes by even more. Mali should be getting a big boost. [See Notes: The Gleneagles Debt Deal, MDRI]

MC: Maybe but I can assure you that we've not seen any real benefits from past debt relief. Sure, there have been announcements that such-and-such number of teachers or health workers have been hired thanks to HIPC, but it has never been possible to establish a link between debt relief and the benefits claimed for it.

You have to put debt relief within the wider context of the health and education crises in Mali, which is to say: you have to know about the conditions attached to debt relief. Mali only got debt



relief because over the last ten years it has proved itself to be what we can call a “good student” of the World Bank and the IMF. That is to say, whatever they want us to do, we do. To get debt relief we had to draw up a “Poverty Reduction Strategy”, which is the unique framework that sets all the development policy in Mali today. And written into that document is the requirement that health and education should be privatised. [See Notes: Mali and HIPC]

BY: Couldn't that be a good thing? If it means that there are more services available in Mali, who cares whether it is funded privately or publicly?

MC: You have to understand what the word “privatisation” means in Mali. For us, it means just that the State pulls back from providing something. The World Bank says: “the State has too much to do, so stop providing social services and concentrate on stabilising the economy.” And that's it. The State pulls out and leaves communities to fend for themselves. So we have “Community Schools” and “Community Hospitals”. These are institutions funded by payments from the local community; they collect money together to build the school, to furnish the classrooms and to pay the salaries of the teachers.

This might sound like a good thing: communities getting together to look after their own needs. But these are needs which properly should be provided for by the State, and in any case the communities don't have the means to provide them. They end up with teachers on a low wage and with no qualifications. We have what is called a “voluntary employment scheme” for teachers in Mali, such that anyone with the most basic education can work as a teacher for a fraction of the official teacher's wage. What kind of education do you think that children are getting under these conditions?

BY: That sounds to me like a heroic plan to pull Mali up by its own bootstraps, to wrench education out of its crisis while meeting the budget constraints.

MC: So ask yourself: why do we have budget constraints? It is because one of the conditions that we had to fulfil to get debt relief was to cut public spending. This meant that we haven't got enough money to pay qualified teachers the salary that they deserve. So because of the conditions on debt relief, we haven't got the money to run a proper education system.

BY: But isn't the money from debt relief used to increase those budgets, and enable more teachers to be hired?

MC: That's the problem. There is no transparency in the way that the debt relief money is being used. I blame the international finance institutions for this. They could easily have required that our government properly account for all the debt relief money and show how it has been used. But they didn't do this. All the conditions were about privatisation, cutting public spending, free market reforms, etc. There was no effort to make our own government account for what it was spending. In each Ministry there is what is called a **comité de suivi**, a committee which is

meant to monitor debt relief money. But they don't work at all; they are useless; they are chaired by the Minister whom they are meant to be monitoring. There is one place, out of 20, set aside on each committee for an organisation from civil society, but the representative is marginalised and can't do anything. It's a sham, that is to say a trick designed to convince civil society - and especially you in the North - that everything is now fine and that the World Bank has changed.

BY: So there's no hope at all? The exhausted campaigners are right? All the money freed up from the G8 in Gleneagles will disappear into the same black hole as the HIPC money?

MC: Not at all! There is hope. In Africa in general and Mali specifically, we will be demanding that the government is clear about what it is spending this new money on; and in the North you can continue to demand that the only condition put on debt cancellation is that there is transparency in the way it is used. Now is not the time to give up! If the social movements continue to mobilise, to inform themselves, and to demand reform from their governments and the international finance institutions, we will make real progress. It is progress already that we are talking about debt relief and debt cancellation. Now we have to focus on

the policies that prevent this from being put to good use. It is true that we haven't yet had the final victory, but that victory is not far off, I am convinced of this.

At this point the gate for Moctar's flight opened. For more information contact Jubilee Scotland: mail@jubileescotland.org.uk

Notes:

The Republic of Mali: a landlocked country in West Africa with a population twice that of Scotland. Mali became democratic in 1991 after two decades of military dictatorship. Today Mali is ranked by the UN as the third least developed country but has become regionally influential in the campaign for substantive alternatives to “structural adjustment” as a model of development.

The Gleneagles Debt Deal, MDRI: Multilateral Debt Relief Initiative is the official name for the Gleneagles G8 Debt Deal. This cancels all debts owed by eligible countries to the World Bank, IMF and African Development Bank. African countries have their debts reduced by between 79% and 48%; Mali's debt (approx. \$3 billion in 2003) is reduced by 56% (see “G8 Debt Deal: One Year On”: p.6, www.eurodad.org, 22 Dec 2006.) However, eligible countries see the aid they get reduced, and structural adjustment conditions continue to apply. For more information see debtribunal.wordpress.com; www.jubileescotland.org.uk

Mali and HIPC: Mali has received three rounds of debt relief under the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries Initiative. The aim of HIPC is to provide debt relief conditional on countries pursuing strong programmes of adjustment and reform. ■

One of the conditions that we had to fulfil to get debt relief was to cut public spending. This meant that we haven't got enough money to pay qualified teachers. So because of the conditions on debt relief, we haven't got the money to run an education system.

perhaps we're the baddies?

Britain generally still maintains its belief in itself as a force for good in the world.

John Wight challenges that assumption

The official history of Britain is one of glory, achievement and noble endeavour. This tiny island nation, we are taught, at one time controlled an empire that covered two thirds of the globe, spreading civilisation, free trade, democracy and freedom, British values which have shaped our world for the past four or five hundred years. British industrial might led the way for over a century in productivity, innovation and invention, and Britain's system of parliamentary democracy has spawned imitation the world over, as have British universities with their proud tradition of excellence. It would be hard to find a published history which does not concur with the aforementioned in either detail or sentiment. And yet it is a lie, a fabricated, obscurantist version of a history which, in truth, should be a source of shame to every right thinking British citizen.

The British State came into existence with the passing of the 1707 Act of Union joining the English and Scottish parliaments. The monarchy had already been joined in 1603, but politically, economically and militarily the two nations remained distinct, each following their own course. Wales had already been annexed by England in 1536, and Ireland would not be brought into the orbit of what would then be known as the United Kingdom until 1801.

The impulse behind the formation of the British State was the desire of a rising merchant class, whose power and influence had grown with their wealth, to reap the rewards inherent in larger and more powerful military's ability to forge a larger empire by which to fund a nascent industrial revolution. The increased supply of natural and human resources required at home to fuel economic growth was also a key factor in the formation of this new political and economic entity. The patina of homogeneity and nationhood ascribed to it was and always has been with the intention of beguiling the masses into believing their interests were being served by this union.

They weren't and never have been.

The resulting history since the formation of Britain has been one of war, exploitation, plunder and pillage. From the triangular trade – in which African slaves were bought and then transported to work on plantations in the Caribbean and the Americas, with the goods produced subsequently transported back to and sold in Europe - to the opium trade in China, famines in India, concentration camps in Africa, Britain has engineered and perpetrated some of the most heinous and barbaric crimes against humanity ever recorded. Yet those directly responsible, undoubtedly worthy of being labelled genocidal maniacs and mass murderers, are venerated.

Men like Sir Charles Napier, whose statue sits in Trafalgar Square, a man whose legacy is written in the blood of the poor and wretched of India, where he spread British values at the point of a sword, to the poor and working people of this island, where prior to his posting to India he played a key role in suppressing the Chartist movement.

Then, of course, there is Winston Spencer Churchill, the exemplar

of that British bulldog spirit responsible for withstanding the might of Hitler's war machine, the inspiration behind Britain's survival during the dark days after the fall of France in 1940 and America's entry into the war in 1942. We are all familiar with the stirring speeches, the defiant V for victory salute. What is less well known is his role in the gassing of the Kurdish town of Sulamaniya in 1925. Then he was Britain's colonial secretary and, faced with a growing insurgency in the newly and artificially constituted nation of Iraq, Churchill ordered the town bombed from the air with poison gas.

If, regardless of this heinous event, Churchill's racism and imperialist heart still remained in doubt, it was reaffirmed by the statement he made to the Peel Commission of Inquiry in 1937, set up to investigate the brutal response of British military forces in Palestine. Churchill said: " I do not agree that the dog in the manger has the final right to the manger, even though he may have lain there for a very long time. I do not admit that right. I do not admit, for instance, that a great wrong has been done to the Red Indians of America, or the black people of Australia. I do not admit that a wrong has been done to these people by the fact that a stronger race, a higher grade race, a more wordly-wise race, to put it that way, has come in and taken their place."

With regard Iraq, this is a nation that was formed at the end of the First World War when France and Britain carved up the Middle East as spoils of war upon the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. What these learned imperialists created back then has remained the cause of the unremitting strife and misery which afflicts the people in that tortured region to this day. And then, as now, the underlying cause for Britain's presence in the region was oil.

In truth, there are so many episodes of cruelty and barbarity committed in the name of the British Empire it is difficult to know where to begin and where to end. From Ireland to India, from Africa to America, a trail of blood and suffering has been the true legacy of an organised system of what can only be described as state-sponsored murder and theft. Every statue and monument in the centre of every British town and city, every grand building, palace, and mansion, all of them were financed by wealth pillaged from Britain's former colonies and colonial peoples.

After the Second World War, Britain's role as imperial power was usurped by the United States. Her economy in tatters, her empire unsustainable, the then British establishment reluctantly accommodated itself to the new reality in the shape of the economic and military behemoth to the West. The IMF and World Bank, formed in 1944, were institutions designed on the surface to rebuild Europe and stabilise her economies. With the dollar now acting as the international currency, the US was in fact asserting her role as global superpower. The threat of Soviet expansion in the East was hyped up to spread fear amongst America's allies, which led to the formation of NATO in 1949 and a permanent US military presence in Western Europe thereafter.

The same British establishment which had acquiesced to this also set about extricating itself from the burden of empire. In short order Britain ceded control of her possessions in the Middle East and India, in each case resulting in a brutal civil war as a consequence of British perfidy in having utilised that trusted and reliable colonial tactic of divide and rule. By the 1950's and 1960's national liberation movements had sprung up in Malaya, Kenya, and, closer to home, in the six counties in the north of Ireland.

Today, Britain's role is that of a key US ally in this new world order which came into being after the Second World War. With the collapse of the Soviet Bloc in the early nineties US power has spread like a veritable cancer, intent on spreading that extreme variant of capitalism, the free market, to every part of the globe. Simply put, this translates to the super exploitation of human and natural resources in the interests of an international economic aristocracy.

In Europe, Britain performs the same function as that of South Korea in Southeast Asia, Colombia in Latin America, and Israel in the Middle East, each a regional bastion of US power and free market prerogatives. In return each receives a share of the spoils in the form of aid, trade credits, access to markets and/or arms and military protection.

It is a system, a world order, directly responsible for the deep polarisation which exists today between the developing and developed world. The attacks on 9/11 came - despite the spin and hysteria about good and evil, about freedom and tyranny - they came as a direct result of years of Western imperialism in the Middle East. The ensuing wars on Afghanistan and Iraq have been a case of history repeating itself, except this time with Britain relegated to a subordinate role.

For it is a fact that, as with our American cousins across the other side of the Atlantic, we, the British 'white' working class, the cannon fodder used by generations of the British ruling class in every imperialist war and military campaign fought in the interests of profit, we are inculcated with the notion that we are an exceptional people, our country a bastion of civilisation, fair play, and decency in a dangerous and chaotic world.

Jingoism, racism and nationalism are the necessary and inevitable concomitants of such a worldview, and they have been used to great effect by successive generations of the British ruling class to maintain a status quo which enshrines inequality and injustice.

The anachronisms of empire abound in British institutions which remain sacrosanct yet entirely unaccountable. These include the nonsense which is the monarchy, the House of

Lords, and the judiciary. On the surface they appear as quaint, even benign aspects of a heritage which makes Britain unique and distinct. However, unique and distinct are not necessarily positive virtues, and in the context of a society which values progress over regress, justice over injustice, they are in fact positively negative.

Today, in 2006, despite having the fourth largest economy in the world, Britain currently has the worst social indicators of any nation in Western Europe. It is home to the poorest pensioners; the highest rate of child poverty; the most under-funded public health service; the most under-funded public education system; the lowest paid workers who work the longest hours; the highest paid corporate and management executives; and the highest prison population.

Following the brutal example of Britain's allies across the Atlantic, social and economic injustice is now wedded into the fabric of British society; the emphasis now on punishing the poor and disadvantaged instead of alleviating their poverty. In fact, the very notion of British society today, after three decades of the free market, is that of a conglomeration of individual self interest unhindered by any shared obligation or responsibility to the collective, with our neighbours and fellow citizens now viewed as competitors. Indeed,

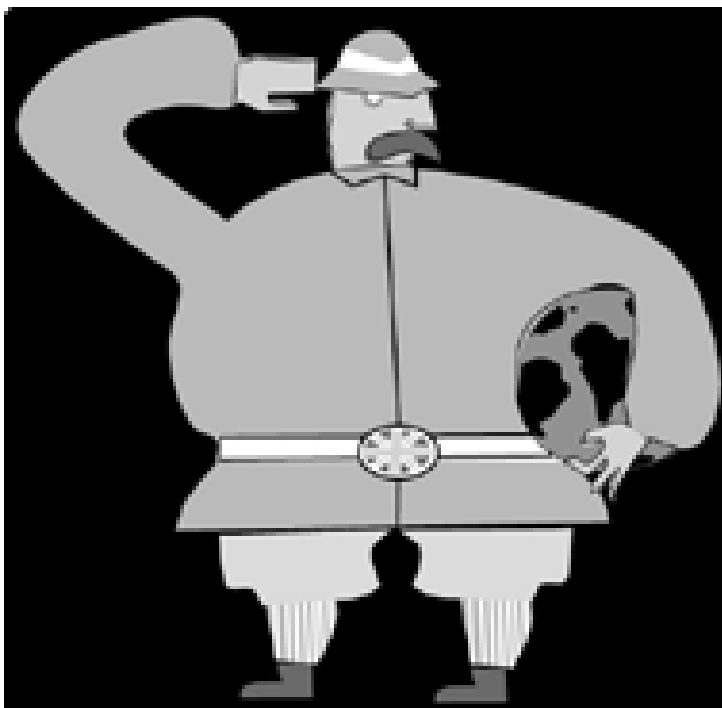
rather than citizens the British people have been turned into consumers, concerned only with superficial interests and how to make as much money as possible.

What can be done, then, to reverse the trajectory of a nation formed and continuously ruled by those who practise state-craft like gangsters?

Given the racism and jingoism that lurks behind benign words such as patriotism and Britishness, the ritual, pomp and ceremony employed to lend nobility to a history of barbarity and pillage - and accepting that we currently live in an age when US imperialism poses a threat to the future of the planet the extent of which has never been equalled in human history - the only solution that would produce qualitative change is the break-up of the British State back into its component parts. Not only would this be in the interests of those who've suffered and are suffering as a consequence of Britain's role in the world overseas - as a major US economic, political and military satellite - but it would also be in the interests of the vast majority of the British people, specifically the working class.

Ultimately, a world without Britain in it would be a better world indeed. ■

John Wight is a member of Solidarity



reviews

Smoke and Mirrors: Fighting Housing Privatisation, Edinburgh Against Stock Transfer (EAST) (2006) (DVD: 45 minutes) Edinburgh: Pilton Video (Cost £5 plus p & p available from Pilton Video, 30 Ferry Road Avenue, Edinburgh, EH4 4BA, www.piltonvideo.org)

Have no fears! This is **not** another expensively produced housing stock transfer promotional film but a film that captures the resistance of tenants in Edinburgh to housing privatisation in 2005.

Regular readers of the Scottish Left Review will know that privatisation has figured prominently in a number of previous issues, especially in recent years. And a key plank in the Scottish Executive's privatisation programme has been its commitment to housing stock transfer across Scotland. Housing stock transfer, that is the transfer of council owned and managed housing stock (what used to be called 'council houses') to 'registered social landlords' has been the main component of Executive public housing policy since 1999. Arguably the drive to remove what remains of Scotland's depleted council housing stock, which has decreased by over 65 per cent since 1979, from councils – and public political accountability – has surpassed a similar programme of transfers across England and Wales which serves to remind us, if indeed we need more reminding, that 'Scotland' is not being 'protected', as some would have us believe, from the more radical aspects of Blairite and Third Way ideology.

Housing has long been central to political and social agitation in Scotland. From the Clydeside Rent Strikes of the First World War and early 1920s, through to squatters and other struggles in the post-1945 era, housing – and the demand for decent and affordable public housing to rent has been to the fore in Scottish politics. Housing stock transfer, in some respects, represents the latest episode in this long history. It has re-ignited the politics of housing in Scotland; it has refocused attention on the question of affordable housing provision for a sizeable proportion of the population of Scotland today. It has also called into question once more the nature of New Labour's UK-wide programme of public sector 'modernisation' and the wholesale restructuring of welfare provision. And let's make no mistake, council housing has played a crucial role in the development of state welfare/social policy in Britain during the course of the twentieth century.

These issues provide the background context for this excellent film which explores opposition to Edinburgh City Council's plans during 2005 to transfer 23,000 council houses to the City of Edinburgh Housing Association (CESA). Focusing on the campaign by Edinburgh Against Stock Transfer (EAST) to defend council housing in Edinburgh, the film presents many of the key issues that lie at the centre of the stock transfer debate across the country. Not only is it in Edinburgh that tenants and other campaigning groups have argued that the case for transfer has often been high on expensive and glossy promotion, usually involving well known 'media personalities'

(and in Edinburgh Sally Magnusson joins the list of those who have featured on promotional films), and low on making open to public scrutiny many of the key funding and other policy implications of transfer. 'Smoke and mirrors' neatly describes not only how housing transfer has often been promoted – but also privatisation in all its diverse forms.

Much of the focus of housing policy and housing debate in Scotland has focused on the particularities of Glasgow and its acute housing problems. That this film focuses on Edinburgh gives it added weight, I feel. Coming on the back of the decision by Glasgow tenants to vote for transfer in 2002 there was expectation, not least at Scottish Executive and local government levels, that tenants in Edinburgh and elsewhere in Scotland would follow suit. However, the ongoing controversy around transfer in Glasgow was an important factor in persuading Edinburgh tenants to reject transfer. They voted by 53 per cent to 47 per cent to reject transfer in a ballot in December 2006. The 'Glasgow Factor' features strongly in this film and incidentally this was identified by Edinburgh Council's housing department following a post-ballot survey as a key issue in the no-vote.

Since the Edinburgh no-vote, two other ballots of tenants, in Stirling and in Renfrewshire, have resulted in no-votes. In each area the same issues prevail: that transfer is privatisation in all but name, it removes public housing from local democratic political control and leads to higher rents (and profits for financial institutions!) [see Defend Council Housing, 2006 – www.defendcouncilhousing.org.uk].

This is a partisan film and is all the better for it. It does not offer some kind of bland 'balanced' account of transfer but it clearly on the side of those rejecting transfer. Having seen many of the promotional videos produced at great cost by local authorities up and down the country, this DVD offers a range of different and crucially important insights on the transfer process. In this respect it has relevance well beyond Edinburgh and Scotland. If I had one criticism to make it is on the Edinburgh 'context'. It is clear from the film that transfer in Edinburgh would have seen valuable chunks of council owned land sold off to the private sector for next to nothing (and each housing unit was only valued around £900). In places such as Leith, where there is great demand for land for expensive 'upmarket' housing, there are obvious attractions to developers here. Yet that Edinburgh currently represents a 'boomtown' for property developers, banks and financiers remains somewhat implicit. The declining quality and poor conditions of the council-owned stock stands in increasingly sharp contrast to the accumulation of wealth not least in terms of property elsewhere in the City. Edinburgh's tenants, in rejecting stock transfer, were not only putting one over on the Scottish Executive in its own 'backyard' but also drawing attention to the yawning gap that New Labour is presiding over across the UK. This film is a must for all of those who are resisting New Labour's privatisation agenda across the UK.

Gerry Mooney ■

Grasping the Thistle: How Scotland Must React to the Three Key Challenges of the Twenty First Century, D. MacLeod and M. Russell, Argyll Publishing, 2006, 256pp, £7.99, ISBN 1902831861

In the small world of Scottish politics Grasping the Thistle by Dennis MacLeod & Michael Russell is a brave book. There are two reasons why I say this. Firstly, it confronts the reader to think about some of the key challenges that face our nation regarding its democracy, economics and environment. Now, you may not agree with a number of the authors suggestions on how we should meet these challenges, and there is much that I would disagree with them on, but at least they have put their cards on the table and want readers to engage in the debate. And secondly, the Scottish political media doesn't often lend itself to those who want to throw some new ideas into the political melting pot. Some of the coverage the book has received in the media confirms my view that one of the contributory factors that stifle debate in Scotland is the way the media can present it.

Dennis MacLeod and Michael Russell both believe passionately in the ability of the Scottish people to run their own affairs. They rightly highlight the increasing dislocation between the democratic political system and the citizen. They argue that our representative democracy no longer meets the "expectations of its citizens", and its lack of responsiveness should give way to a "democratic revolution" that will see the transfer of power from the political classes to the citizen. One small problem with getting this revolution underway is that so many of our fellow citizens have now disengaged with our democratic processes to such an extent that they will take some persuading to come out and join the people's march.

I am not convinced that the best way to deliver a representative democracy is through abolishing political parties, although I do believe all political parties have to work more effectively at engaging with the electorate. I also don't believe there is an appetite within our society for this type of "democratic revolution". There may be some merit in the authors' idea of a Citizen's Commission to look at how we could improve the political process, but it should also consider how we can draw more of the nation's talent into the process of government rather than having to rely purely on 129 MSP to produce all our government ministers.

MacLeod and Russell point the finger at the political parties as the biggest obstacle to their "democratic revolution" and they argue that the increasing use of internal discipline within political parties has led to the death of the politics of ideas. Interestingly they give little mention of the role that the political media have in nurturing this culture of political control. Modern political parties tend to be reactive bodies and are greatly influenced by the media and how they will portray them. If they believe that re-igniting the fire of political ideas can be delivered then we will also need to see greater tolerance within the media to allowing these ideas to be aired and debated.

This is a book that not only advocates the need for political freedom for its citizens in taking greater control of their own society, but it also argues that political and economic freedom go hand in hand. The authors subscribe largely to the work of Adam Smith in their analysis of the economy and how we should go about overcoming the challenges it faces. They argue for the

opening up of public service to the forces of the free market and competition, as this will "expose weaknesses" and will provide the "best opportunity for all". Opportunity being the key word here, as I have little doubt that the introduction of the free market in public services will result in the private sector picking off the more profitable elements of public services.

However this is an area where the two authors clearly have differences of opinion as Michael Russell qualifies his support for competition within public services, recognising that such a blanket approach would be inappropriate. MacLeod's enthusiasm for the free market is understandable given his business background; however in his desire to reduce the size of the public sector while also improving its efficiency, he has to recognise that many of our public services will never be profitable and will always be cash hungry as with our NHS. One example of the private sector getting greater involvement in the delivery of public services is through the Public Private Partnership. There is now increasing independent evidence that they do not serve the public purse well, but they are extremely profitable for the private sector.

MacLeod and Russell believe that Scotland as a nation has many ills that require radical treatment if the nation is to get back on its feet again. They may be accurate in diagnosing many of the difficulties our nation faces, but their treatment is of the alternative medicine variety. With more freethinking on tackling the challenges our nation faces, the healthier the debate will be and Grasping the Thistle is a valuable contribution to that debate.

Michael Matheson MSP

Ramparts of Resistance: why workers lost their power and how to get it back, S. Cohen, Pluto Press, 2006, ppvii+248, p/b £13.99, ISBN 0745315291.

This book not only poses arguably the key question of historical praxis for those that are, and those that might become, highly conscious trade unionists but it also tries to provide a sustained answer to the conundrum facing these trade unionists today. Its breath and scope are thus impressive, covering as they do the period since the 1960s and both Britain and the US. Ramparts of Resistance also seeks to present a specific and idiosyncratic perspective to both academic and practitioner writing and thinking on union renewal and rebuilding by avoiding, in its own words, setting out a programme for instruction and rather relating to the mass of union member activity as it is presently constituted.

One of the underpinning strands of Cohen's overall argument is the injunction that workplace struggle over 'bread and butter' workplace issues should not be dismissed as being narrow, economic and incapable of generating higher levels of oppositional consciousness. Consequently, she prioritises workplace activists and 'rank and file' workers and is sharply critical of the 'union bureaucracy' (her terms), where here belief is that capitalism will continually compel workers to resist. But she insists those seeking union renewal must begin with "forms of resistance as they arise and where they are" (p3). Another important strand of her argument is that member-led union

democracy is crucial for generating membership participation and this is crucial for effective unionism. Here, Cohen mounts as exposition of 'union as institutions' versus 'unions as social movements', clearly favouring the latter. One could then term her perspective as a 'rank-and-file' one of a 'syndicalist' rather than 'Trotskyist' persuasion. Although Cohen recognises the different traditions of US and UK grassroots union activity, the union movements in each country are sufficiently similar for her to be able to argue for her version of a single rank and file strategy for both.

In her consideration of Britain, the struggles of workers in Scotland are given their rightful place within her analysis and thesis. Among the strong points that Cohen paints on her canvass are the following insights. First, the defeats and demobilisation that unions experienced since the 1970s were not historically inevitable or predetermined. Second, the dominant hold of the reformist ideology and ideas of the labour movement among workers is predicated on the absence of an alternative vision because of worker's day-to-day material experience. Third, mass, particularly, primary picketing became fetishised in the two union movements as the key tactic of militancy to detriment of solidarity action. Cohen recognises the weakness of a tactic (sometimes elevated into a strategy) which is based on physical blockading because it relies on huge consistent turnouts in the face of police countermeasures.

Of course, the book is not without some weaknesses of its own. In her criticisms of the far left, she is in danger of 'throwing the baby out with the bathwater' because she does not

acknowledge that the far left has, despite its often destructive nature, helped maintain much workplace organisation in very difficult circumstances. Chapters 1 to 6 are replete with continual examples of strikes and struggles over the last forty odd years. This seems to underline Cohen's view of unrelenting rebellion amongst the rank-and-file and that workplace worker resistance can pose a fundamental challenge to capital even though it may be of an 'instinctive' rather than 'explicit' rejection. On top of this, the dichotomy between the rank-and-file and the bureaucracy is posited as an iron-rule rather than a tendency, with the consequence that this weakens its analytical and explanatory power. And for a book that attributes crucial importance to the rank-and-file, the reader is left facing some significant omissions concerning exactly how is the rank-and-file to be organised and what the rank-and-file would look like. These are reasonable questions because it is not clear if the members are or should be the preferred rank-and-file or whether there is a separation of the rank-and-file from ordinary members. There are also several methodological weaknesses in the overly agitprop and polemical style of the book. One is the 'Dave Sparts' language of exaggeration and hyperbole. Another is the insufficient attention paid to substantiation and argumentation so that essential, if not even critical, 'why' and 'how' questions are not fully or convincingly answered.

But these criticisms are far from dismissing Ramparts because it can genuinely prompt a useful discussion and dialogue because it moves away, in some major respects, from common but trite ultra-left formulations and analysis found elsewhere.

Gregor Gall



feedback

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

The pensioners' dilemma as Lou Howson admits (SLR issue 37), is indeed how to achieve unity and how to unite Scotland's pensioners as a formidable force. Why not unite behind the main pensioners' organisation in Scotland - the Scottish Pensioners' Forum?

The Scottish Pensioners' Forum was established in 1992 as the umbrella group in Scotland for groups and individuals working to promote the rights and welfare of the elderly. The Forum is made up of both individual members and a wide variety of groups including elderly forums, trades unions, churches, tenants associations and retirement clubs. National organisations such as Age Concern Scotland, Help the Aged and the National League of the Blind and Disabled are affiliated to the Forum. It also has the backing of the STUC and its constituent unions.

Indeed, the STUC, far from sulking, has continued to support the Scottish Pensioners Forum and has made strenuous efforts to promote unity among the disparate groups that exist currently. However, demanding unity, as the writer clearly does, involves all parties being able to respect the position of other groups. The STUC's recollection - shared by the Scottish Pensioners Forum - is that some groups, in order to promote their own political ends, fail to grasp this simple principle of unity and partnership.

The Forum is essentially a campaigning organisation, which strives to bring together older people and their supporters to allow them to present a strong and united voice on the issues which concern them. A united attempt to create a Scottish Pensioners Parliament was made in 2003 - a Scottish Pensioners Parliament Steering Group was set up and, facilitated by Help the Aged staff, was discussing a possible structure, constitution and funding. However, when the National Pensioners Convention decided to move up from London and attempt to colonise Scotland, that effectively put paid to any progress on this project and it was dropped. Strangely, Lou makes no reference to this previous attempt to form a Scottish Pensioners Parliament nor the resultant behaviour that drove the final nail into the coffin of that last attempt.

The Scottish Pensioners' Forum, affiliated to the NPC nationally, opposed the setting up of a Scottish 'branch', as we felt yet another body was unnecessary. The Forum, with other older people's organisations, has worked with the Scottish Executive to achieve free personal care and to achieve a countrywide free bus travel scheme. Have the same achievements been made throughout the UK? No! Even after all the campaigning work of groups in England (and Scotland), the level of pension is miserable.

The situation for representation of older people in Scotland is far from ideal, but we have the Scottish Executive Older People's Unit; the Older People's Consultative Forum and the Cross Party Group on Older People, Age and Ageing. Many local authorities have what are termed Older People's Champions, although often they are ineffectual. We are consulted on many issues, particularly in the process of the Kerr Report, which held several countrywide consultation meetings, but we do know that politicians don't always listen to what we say. We also insist that they speak to older people themselves - not just the 'professionals'.

The latest stage in our campaigning will deliver a further opportunity to tell the politicians what we want - prior to the Scottish Parliament elections in May 2007 the Scottish Pensioners' Forum is holding another of its popular election hustings in Glasgow on Tuesday 3rd April. Chaired by Lesley Riddoch, with location to be confirmed in the New Year, this will form part of a series of hustings on issues such as the environment, mental health, young people etc and, for us, will involve working in partnership with other relevant organisations. United we should be, but to do so personalities and empire-building need to be forgotten!

Margaret Murdoch
Chairperson
Scottish Pensioners Forum

I read with interest John McCallion's brief history of why the rise of the SSP was important in 1999 and in 2003. I also note that he has decided that the SSP are the only party that can carry the left banner into the 2007 elections. It doesn't take a historian to look back and remember John saying similar things in the past; in both 1999 and 2003 John saw New Labour as the standard bearers and the SSP as dividing the left vote.

Jim Monaghan

Last week I launched my independent election campaign for next May's Scottish and local elections (www.votethorp.com). As an ordinary member of the public I don't expect or deserve a huge amount of media attention. However, there is clear evidence that independent candidates are generally excluded from our political system.

The news agenda dictates that preference is always given to an elite of political parties, coverage is dominated by the sometimes bland activities of party leaders and little space is given to any alternative but equally legitimate voices. The political parties receive big state handouts and support - independent candidates receive nothing. Independent people also do not often have the massive financial backing awarded to individual party candidates. Indeed we must pay £500 to the government simply for the privilege of standing. That's before raising money to finance an actual campaign. In addition there is very little support, even decent advice and information, for independent candidates.

Why then do we continue to tolerate this level of anti-people, Iranian-style restrictions on democracy in Scotland? A system that places obstacles in the way of ordinary people who simply choose to stand for public election? And why does the state

actively sanction privileges for those who choose to hide many of their principles and beliefs behind the disguise of a political party machine? All we should be calling for is equality of opportunity for every candidate. Surely that isn't too much to ask?

Duncan Thorp

I am trying to compile an exposure on discrimination against Scots who support independence, and would be grateful to hear from any of your readers who have been humiliated, ridiculed, persecuted, slighted or faced job and other discrimination simply for expressing their belief in independence for Scotland. Two brief examples here:

1) An acquaintance of mine (an SNP activist) faced an artillery of hostile abuse from trade unionists at work for refusing to subscribe to the Labour Party affiliation fund.

2) I was once ridiculed in a college classroom situation for pointing something out during discussion (we'd been shown a Tourist Board film on Fife, and I noticed that the narrative voice was in a plummy Oxford accent). The tutor dismissed my observation, saying 'Yes, we all know your nationalist sympathies'. Laughter ensued. My point, it seemed, wasn't even worthy of consideration (incidentally I was not a member of any political party).

I could continue, but there isn't room here.

Like the term 'separatist' used by scaremongering enemies of independence, 'nationalist' is a convenient label. One minute you're a person, but as soon as you mention your belief in independence for Scotland, you become a 'nationalist'. That makes you something different. You are not an internationalist. You are not rational or sensible. You are anti-English, even if you are married to an English person or have English friends, relatives or family.

Yet us so-called 'nationalists' or 'separatists' probably make up half the population of Scotland, and I am most interested to hear from anyone who has faced humiliation or discrimination - whether they are members of a political party or not, and whether Scottish-born or not - just for voicing outwardly their opinion on equal status for Scotland among the nations of the world.

I ask anyone interested to please contact me.

Jeff Fallow
jefffallow@blueyonder.co.uk

web review

Henry McCubbin

The Big PFI Lie: - PPP brings in private finance.

At the end of a thirty year PPP contract what does the balance sheet show? Has the private sector put any money in at all or has it taken most of the public money out? It would appear that this question is an intuitive no-brainer for everyone but the blind adherers to the so called great Washington Consensus lead in Britain by Gordon Brown. It has been sad to watch the decline of the Labour Party as a mass party under Blair and Brown whereby their own fanatics have been put into positions of authority and heretics to the leader's line damned to obscurity.

How else can one explain the party of peace pursuing warmongering in place of arbitration through the UN, and its craven sell off of democratic control of the public services to the highest bidder, or at perhaps their sale to the most generous contributors to Tony's election kitty or sponsorship of so called fringe meetings at annual conference providing delegates with free booze and sandwiches and giving a platform to the most biddable disciples of marketisation?

All this leads to the privatisation of the NHS in Scotland under the Labour Party whose response to the alarm calls from even their own supporters regarding their apostasy is to insult the argument as they have no facts or intellectual basis respond to it. On the side of those of us who do not wish to see the great socialist advance of the creation of the NHS wiped out by a group of politician without the ability or strength to command the system to serve the people, and instead choose

cowardly retreat through handing control piecemeal to the huge multinational service companies that designed the Washington Consensus. The whole ploy is to force governments, where necessary, to subsidise the sale of our publicly owned assets since it had become too difficult for western capital to organise manufacturing profitably so it had to get its snouts into the taxation stream created for essential public services.

I recommend visiting www.health.ed.ac.uk/CIPHP/Documents/CIPHP_2006_ImpactOfPFIOnScotlandsNHS_Hellowell_000.pdf where a highly critical and well researched report on PPP in Scotland will be found. For right wing propaganda published by the Scottish Executive and no doubt compiled by secondees from the private sectors or others hoping to get propelled through the revolving door to a corporate Valhalla try www.pfcu.scot.nhs.uk/index.htm. There are other useful sites and while as yet the Scottish Health Campaigns Network does not have its own site you can look in to www.keepournhspublic.com/index.php or www.nhscampaign.org.uk/campaign_groups/Scotland.html or www.healthdemocracy.org.uk and finally www.nhsca.org.uk/newsitem1.html. If Andy Kerr thought he could throw his press release on A&E closures through the press room door and run away on holidays with impunity then the Labour MSPs that will lose their seats in May may be waiting for him when he return. Assuming that the NHS Scotland has mastered spine stiffening.



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What a year!

New Year dawned on 1st January with the usual scenario of celebrations being cancelled due to bad weather. The calling-off of Hogmanay left many befuddled hungover Scots wondering whether that meant it was still 2006. And, if that were the case, whether Hogmanay had been cancelled in Thurso every year since 1964.

2007, as a handful of Scots are aware marks the three-hundredth anniversary of the Act of Union, an event only deemed worthy of celebration by Gordon Brown. Indeed, it appears any potential celebrations of the Union would be even more unpopular south of the Border. A recent poll showed a larger majority of English than of Scots are in favour of a fully-independent Scotland, leaving many Nationalists with a dilemma when they go to the ballots this May. Do they (a) Vote for Independence and self-determination or (b) Vote to stay in the UK secure in the knowledge that this to piss-off the English even more.

Gordon Brown, obviously with his sights firmly set on entering number 10 in 2007, interprets Britishness as behaving more English than the English, declaring support for England at the 2006 World Cup and claiming Paul Gascoigne's goal against Scotland in 1996 as his greatest ever footballing memory.

It was, therefore, refreshing last year to see Jack McConnell standing up against him, and declaring openly that he would not be supporting England at last year's World Cup. I was down in England when he made those comments and most of my English friends' reaction to me was one of sympathy that I did not have a team to support in the World Cup. I had to correct them by pointing that if they cared to visit Scotland they would have found we had thirty-one teams to support in the World Cup.

Regrettably, the World Cup was used as the excuse for some rather unsavoury attacks on English people wearing their team's colours. However, Tony Blair's predictable soundbitery of blaming the Tartan Army was not only ignorant but irresponsible.

Anything Blair says in the current global political climate will reach the ears of George Bush. So if he hears about the Tartan Army attacking English people on the streets, they'll suddenly be placed on the Axis of Evil along with Syria, Iran and North

Korea. We'll be totally fucked if he hears about the oil, or the WMD's at Faslane January 1st 2007 brought a huge surprise to all readers of the Daily Mail, who had expected to find their back gardens over-run by Bulgarians and Romanians on the strike of the bells at midnight.

Tuning-in to this air of xenophobia, David Cameron introduced the Tories' new immigration policy in the autumn, as with all New Tory policies it had a predictably touchy-feely veneer to it. Cameron claimed he wanted limits on Bulgarian and Romanian immigrants as they would take jobs away from British disabled people.

Scrape away this veneer and you have two very traditional Old Tory policies, i.e.:

1. "We don't want any more filthy foreigners into this country. This will cause trouble and overcrowding and lead to racism"
2. "Let's get these malingerers off the long-term sick. Take these work-shy scroungers off incapacity benefit and make them clean hotel lavvies and we'll soon find out how disabled they are!"

Conversely, the two most heart-warming news stories in Scotland last year reflected the multicultural nature of our country in the 21st century.

Firstly, Sakcahi Makao finally won his appeal against deportation to Thailand, with the support of his whole local community in Shetland. This despite having a conviction for fire-raising while drunk. On second thoughts, that's probably what swung the support his way: "The laddie's one of us, he burns stuff when he's pissed. Get him to light the wicker man next time we get an English tourist on the Island!"

And finally, there was the story of Molly Campbell, now Misban Ranah, given leave to stay in Pakistan pending her father's appeal against her being sent back to her mother in Stornoway. This was a difficult choice for a 12-year-old girl to make. On the one hand she could live in a remote outpost of the British Empire struggling to come to terms with the 21st century, where people's lives are ruled by religious fundamentalism. Or on the other hand, she could choose to live in Pakistan.

Happy New Year, and a Peaceful 2007



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