



## What State Scottish Democracy?

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## Comment

This is one of those slightly odd times in politics. In Scotland we are a while away from our next election, but we are in the middle of an incredibly important process which will decide how those elections take place, who they can elect. The Parliament is showing signs of creating its own establishment and this may get worse or get better in the coming years. In the UK we have just had an election but no-one can agree what it meant. We have just had the biggest mass political movement in the UK for a long, long time with the Make Poverty History events, and yet it is very hard to know if they are going to be remembered as radical or with ridicule. The UK has just become the victim of a terrorist attack which will inevitably change everything. The European project is in turmoil and the United States is becoming more divided by the day. Geo-politics is in flux with China and India scaring the G8 group which see its dominance at threat. And then there is a mood afloat in Latin America and parts of Africa, not to mention the Middle East. The only thing constant is the power of the corporations.

In terms of modern politics, this is a lot of uncertainty. What does it mean for Scotland? What will it mean? This issue of the Scottish Left Review takes a fairly loose look at the state of Scottish democracy and the things it needs to function. In its pages you will find information, guesses, possibilities and fears. We hope that you will also find reason for hope. So what does it all mean? Let us offer you two scenarios.

### Scenario One; not good

The Scottish Parliament becomes Westminster. That is to say, it not only starts to take itself incredibly seriously and starts to relish rather than regret its distance from voters, it becomes its own 'establishment'. The unbridled fury at a minor protest by the SSP proves to be the start of an authoritarianism that kills of dissent, humour and passion and replaces it with the 21st century equivalent of Men in Tights. Which is Up-Tight Men and Women. The establishment it creates is a standard cartel elite. The four big parties start by persecuting the smaller parties which are challenging their pro-business agenda. Then

they marginalise them. Then, by voting to change the electoral system they eliminate them. The media won't complain and democracy is set back a long, long way. Nothing will change for a generation now. We will be obliged to watch at a distance as they vie with each other to offer the really powerful people whatever they want. Scotland will become a more tranquil version of Putin's Russia, where apathy is not only endemic but justified.

Our media deteriorates. The Scotsman Group can't drift further right, but does anyway. The Herald becomes the lifestyle rag its parent company specialises in. The Record continues to think it is for humour and reactionary anger. You have to try hard – really hard – to know anything at all about the world outside your gym or style bar. Politics is invisible. We become every more ignorant.

Westminster stays Westminster. The Labour Party, having dropped to its knees so many times, cannot shake itself to become anything other than the Tories-plus-some-welfare husk that it has become. No-one anywhere really cares whether the Tories or Labour are in, because nothing much will change. Except everyone starts to out-bid each other on who can be 'toughest on terror'. (To say we need to do angry things is not to exploit death, only calling for peace would be to exploit death). And gradually we get into a position where there is nowhere to breathe; no political space, no unobserved space, no-one who might not be under suspicion for being different. By the time we notice that everything has been sold, it is too late. We are owned, not governed.

The people who want to see no social change rewrite the history of 2005. The uprising of anger at the way we treat those weaker than us becomes remembered as a damn fine music concert. We are picked off as either well-meaning fools who don't have to make hard decisions or violent nihilists. Protest goes back to where it was in the 1990s – which is anywhere but on the media or political radar.

Europe comes back with a new constitution; shorter, more focused. That is to say, with all the neo-liberal economics there and the other bits missing. This is what was rejected last time, but this time they won't make the mistake of getting the

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'nationalists' off side by harmonising welfare policy. Europe becomes the United States, but united only for big money with workers left to struggle each against the other.

And the world? Well, it just keeps bombing itself. This becomes the 21st century version of paying someone to dig a whole and fill it – combined with the fear of things that go bump in the night.

The State of Scottish Democracy? Not a meaningful question.

#### Scenario Two: everything changes

Those who created the Scottish Parliament take a look at it and are unhappy. The members of the political parties look at themselves and are unhappy. The SNP is recaptured by members and the neo-liberal posing is put in check. The Labour Party has to face this and fight a social democratic game. Scotland stands square behind the right of small parties to exist so long as people fight for them. The Parliament learns that it is not the point; what it does is the point. Being statesmen stops being the goal. Making a difference becomes the goal again. Diversity is no longer viewed as something to dispose of – small voices are accepted as having a right to be heard. Civic Scotland makes clear it won't stand for cartel politics.

People start to demand more from their media. The Sunday Herald shows that issues interest people. Web-delivered information and independent media sources become more and more popular until the mainstream media notices and realises it better up its game. In the longer term, people start to know things again – and for all our sakes Z-list celebrity returns to where it was before i.e. staking supermarket shelves.

In Westminster, fear of losing power finally forces the Labour Government to consider proportional representation. By 2010 there are socialists sitting in Westminster. Things change, change utterly. People slowly realise that bombing our way to peace and security isn't working. People, ordinary people, start to wonder if we wouldn't be better breaking the chain of violence.

The people who marched on 2 July turn out to mean it. Because we refuse to forget, and because we want people all around the world to think of Scotland as a beacon calling for global change, we take to the streets on the first weekend of every July and we shout until what we asked for is done. We won't let them forget

that we want an end to poverty. It wasn't about the armbands but rather about why we put them on in the first place. And others learn; dissent becomes something people do.

Europe isn't allowed to revert to where it was. Everyone in Paris who campaigned against the constitution with an education campaign showing people what was really behind it keep going. They make enough people aware of the Americanisation of our continent that we stop it forever. Instead, we start to look at what a social Europe would look like. Yes, progress is slow and big money tries to prevent change. But at least we're talking about it.

And as the world changes, so we are less willing to accept conflict. Nothing changes overnight, but people start to at least wake up to the realities we and our planet are facing.

And, of course, what we have tried to do with the Scottish Left Review takes root and grows. Debate is not an exceptional case but the thing we do. Ideas start to emerge. Our new publishing venture – the Scottish Left Review Press (see page 16) – kick-starts a rebirth of radical writing in Scotland. People start to read about their home and how it might be. Questions are asked. Things are challenged. We believe once again in a better Scotland. A better world.

#### And the state of Scottish democracy?

We are of course closer to scenario one than scenario two. But there is good reason to believe that we (the people of Scotland) will refuse to go any further in that direction. We (the left, the committed, the activists) must surely start the fight back. Who will come forward and organise the mass rally for Saturday 1 July next year? No, Tony, we didn't forget. Who will regain Labour for Labour? The unions? Members? Who will regain the SNP? Who will start the boycott of the Scotsman? Who will fight any moves to change our voting system? Who will stand up for forgotten voices? Who will drag up the effort required to care about electoral reform in Westminster? Who will face the tedium of the long slow march to a better EU? Who will do these things?

We apologise for the imposition, but the answer must surely be you. You are the state of Scottish democracy. ■

# what future scottish democracy?

John McAllion looks at the political geometry of Scotland in this post elections period and asks what hope our democracy has of changing anything.

By lunchtime on the day of the terrorist attacks on London, Radio Scotland's coverage had begun its first tentative analysis of the terrible events. In quick succession, we heard from an academic 'expert' on international terrorism, a senior politician and the political editor of a daily tabloid. All three were immediately recognisable as stalwarts of the political establishment. All three proceeded to use the bombings to justify support for a string of right-wing reactions and responses. France and Germany were labelled as culprits for failing to support the Anglo-American attack on Iraq. Their irresponsible opposition, it was suggested, had divided Europe and fractured what should have been a united front in favour of the war. In so doing, they had given encouragement to the kind of terrorists who had murdered and maimed innocent Londoners. Redemption was now only possible through the immediate dispatch of French and German troops to support the occupation of Iraq.

Apologies were then demanded from those who had been foolish enough to challenge the logic of the war against terror. Surely, now they would see the error of their ways and drop their opposition to the raft of anti-terror legislation being brought forward by the Government? In particular, it was suggested, the introduction of ID cards should now rattle through parliament without opposition. 'Bogus' asylum seekers were fingered next as objects of suspicion. Only those with clear and convincing cases should be tolerated any longer. The rest should be sent back to their countries of origin as potential threats to the security of the realm. By any reasonable standard, the views so expressed are variously xenophobic, illiberal, subversive of hard won civil liberties and bordering on the downright racist. To be fair to Radio Scotland, they have since been balanced by more reasonable and considered comment in the many subsequent hours of broadcasting.

Yet they provide a fascinating insight into the unscripted thinking of the political establishment taken unawares by the events in London. All three men are widely regarded as being in touch with mainstream political opinion. All three would be warmly welcomed at receptions in either 10 or 11 Downing Street. All three are potential honours list candidates for services rendered to the British state. All three also revealed themselves to be intolerant of any idea of challenge to the prevailing political orthodoxy. The fact that the three were able to promote such views across the national airwaves without stirring up a storm of protest indicates the extent to which political ideas and attitudes that once were confined to the outer fringes of right wing paranoia have now entered mainstream respectable thinking. Scapegoating foreigners and asylum seekers, deriding democratic opposition and demanding the surrender of civil rights have somehow become the political norm. What is happening to our democracy?

In fact, Scottish/British democracy has relatively recent historical roots. Not until 1929, was a British general election fought under full universal suffrage. Moreover, in the century preceding that landmark election, the British Parliamentary

establishment – Tory and Liberal alike – had fought the advance of democracy every inch of the way. As representatives of British capital, these parliamentary giants had good reason to fear the extension of the vote to ordinary working men and women. Capitalism – their system – had enriched and empowered a propertied minority by ruthlessly exploiting the unpropertied majority of workers who were mired in poverty. Armed with the vote, surely these same workers would now use their newly acquired political power to sweep away the old system and replace it with a new socialist order built on the foundation stone of workers' democracy. Capitalism and its defenders trembled at the prospect of such a workers' democracy. The 20th century stage was therefore set for a titanic struggle between two irreconcilable social forces locked together in a deadly parliamentary embrace.

This idea of democracy as a parliamentary struggle for power between capitalism and socialism found its most forceful and eloquent expression in the speeches and writings of Aneurin Bevan. In a passage from **In Place Of Fear** published in 1952, he wrote: "the issue therefore in a capitalist democracy resolves itself into this: either poverty will use democracy to win the struggle against property, or property, in fear of poverty, will destroy democracy." Bevan understood the class nature of the workers' struggle under capitalism. He also knew that in this struggle, only one side could win. He had enormous confidence in the British working class and envisaged no other outcome to the struggle than poverty (the workers) finally using democracy to win the struggle against property (capital). Fifty years on, its beginning to look like his confidence may have been misplaced.

The struggle between parliamentary socialism and capital can be traced through the history of successive Labour governments. A bankers' ramp brought Ramsay MacDonald's government to its ignominious and inglorious end in 1931. Capitalism then survived the initial socialist onslaught of the Atlee government, preserving the commanding heights of the British economy in private hands and breaking through to 13 years of Tory hegemony during which capitalism and capitalists "never had it so good". The Wilson governments of the sixties came into office determined to reverse Tory economic policies and to build a modern socialism forged in the white hot heat of a scientific revolution. They failed miserably being blown off course by sterling crises, devaluation and the monetary attacks of city and international speculators who were determined to use non parliamentary means to crush any prospect of a parliamentary road to socialism. Jim Callaghan's government was dealt the final indignity of going cap in hand to the International Monetary Fund and being forced to embrace a monetarist programme that opened the way for Thatcher. She never made any secret of her historic role. As she told the 1983 Scottish Tory conference, the prize to be won in the election of that year was "to banish from our land the dark, divisive clouds of Marxist socialism".

The extent to which she succeeded in doing precisely that is reflected in the New Labour government that followed her.

Desperate to avoid the reverses and humiliations inflicted on the Wilson and Callaghan governments by capital, Blair and Brown got their surrender to capitalism in first by incorporating that surrender in their 1997 election business manifesto. This quite remarkable document promises British capital everything it could ever wish from any capitalist friendly government - macro-economic stability, no risks with inflation, low taxes, no burdensome regulations on business, open and competitive markets at home and abroad, public expenditure restraint, continuing legal shackles on trade unions, flexible labour markets, the sell-off of public assets and the private delivery of public services. As Gordon Brown himself wrote in the introduction to the business manifesto: "So far from being in conflict, the interests of the Labour Party and the business community are in harmony. To bring about the fair and prosperous society that Labour seeks, we need successful and enterprising businesses making strong profits."

What Nye Bevan would have made of this historic surrender to "property" we can only surmise. What is certain is that today we are still paying a heavy political price for that surrender. Effectively, Labour had abandoned the parliamentary road to socialism. Class struggle was now off the political agenda. There was to be no transition to socialism either now or in the future. The enterprise and dynamism of competitive markets, now integrated into the new Clause Four of the Labour Party's constitution, was here to stay. Labour had become just

another capitalist party. Indeed, all four mainstream Scottish political parties were now capitalist and contending with each other to be the party of choice for business. The Tories and Liberals always had been - no surprise there. The SNP, having at one time being branded as the Tartan Tories, enjoyed a brief flirtation with the left as the likes of Jim Sillars and Alex Neill joined their ranks. It proved to be short lived and quickly the pro- business wing of the party reasserted its control with an agenda of slashing corporation tax and turning Scotland into the most business friendly wee country in the world.

This mainstream abandonment of socialism in Scotland and Britain has been driven by domestic factors and events too numerous and complex to address in this short essay. However, it also conforms to a global pattern of economic development promoted through the IMF, World Bank and WTO. Everywhere on the planet, peoples and governments are being told that there is no alternative to the neo-liberal agenda. Privatisation, deregulation, the opening up of economies to foreign direct investment and legal protection for the rights and privileges of foreign investors and capital are all now key parts of a global template for economic growth and success. These are the market forces that all of our mainstream parties claim cannot be bucked.

The idea of socialism, of course, never disappeared. Many people retained the faith that another world very different from capitalism was possible. They found their voice through huge grassroots movements against war, capitalism and

globalisation. Here in Scotland, with the introduction of proportional representation, they even made a breakthrough in elections to a Scottish Parliament that returned six socialist and six Green MSPs. As the G8 leaders arrived at Gleneagles, Scotland's biggest ever demonstration against the poverty their capitalist system was creating took to the streets of Edinburgh. At the G8 alternatives summit on the Sunday, thousands of socialists debated how best to turn the capitalist tide and buck the market forces being forced down our throats by the political establishment. Socialism was alive and well and on the streets of Scotland.

Yet, the perspective was very different from inside that political establishment. The 2005 UK General Election had seen New Labour's parliamentary majority slashed and its popular support plummet. At its high point in 1997, New Labour had attracted 13.5 million votes and more than 43 per cent of the

vote. By 2005 that had collapsed to just 9.5 million votes and 37 per cent of the vote. Labour had polled two million votes fewer in winning the 2005 election than it had in losing the 1992 election. Something deadly serious was going wrong with the New Labour modernisation project. Yet, those benefiting from the collapse in their support continued to be the other capitalist parties - the Tories, Liberals and SNP. The SSP and Greens were simply not at the First Past the Post races. In the Scottish Parliament, things also began to turn against the smaller, radical parties.

The four big parties are now looking to use the reform of the local government electoral system and of the Parliament's own electoral system to bring in a Single Transferable Voting system based on four member constituencies - a size likely to squeeze the smaller parties out of the parliamentary and local government picture altogether. They seem determined to restrict electoral legitimacy to those parties committed to free markets and capitalist enterprise. The recent co-ordinated all-party attack on the SSP for disrupting Scottish parliamentary procedures serves well a wider plan for isolating and cauterising any hint of a socialist alternative from the world of parliamentary politics.

Such a development would be a tragedy. Parliaments remain the way by which democratic authority is legitimised in today's world. That is why business and capital have invested so heavily in a parliamentary system that serves their needs. That is why they fought the parliamentary struggle with socialism to what they hoped would be the finish with the advent of New Labour. The anecdote that introduced this piece reminds us of the dark forces that operate behind the façade of capitalist democracy. We need socialists on the inside and taking the fight to the representatives of those dark forces. We cannot allow property, in fear of poverty, to destroy our democracy. The socialist parliamentary challenge must survive and revive. That is a goal that can and should unite the left inside and outside of the walls of Holyrood and Westminster. ■

*John McAllion is a former Labour MP and MSP*

# power to the people

The G8 protests proved that people can make a difference. Eurig Scandrett looks at the new opportunities that have arisen as a result of the protests

The May election seems a long time ago when viewed from the other side of the G8, although it can be seen more clearly from this distance. Around the election, the hype was about Blair's departure and the Brown succession. Discussion of immigration shifted further to the racist Right, and Respect and Reform were the new watchwords of the new government. Much has been said about how the election delivered what the country wanted: a returned Labour government with a slimmed down majority. Two months on and we can see that the reduced majority has made no difference, despite Blair's assurance that he will 'listen and learn'.

The Blair-Brown government post election is indistinguishable from the one before. Having a narrower majority and (with less than a quarter of the electorate's votes – a case for electoral reform) an unjustifiable mandate, has changed neither content nor style of government. We have stopped waiting for Blair to stand down and Brown to take over, even though it is unlikely that will make a great deal of difference. In the meantime, we are seeing Blair's flair as a tactical magician.

Tony Blair, post G8, has managed, with some success, to portray himself as a dignified and unswerving statesman in the face of terrorism; a hands-on leader of a successful Olympic bid; and a champion of the poor and the environment wringing reluctant concessions out of George W. Bush. Without flinching from his shoulder-to-shoulder stance with US's imperial project in Iraq or neoliberal expansionism, Blair has produced the conjuring trick of appearing to be on the side of campaigning rock stars against US policies.

Blair used the G8 to demonstrate that he has 'listened and learned' from the co-optable parts of the movement and done his best to deliver in the face of an intransigent Bush. Thus, he distances himself from Bush with a shrug ('well guys I did my best and at least we're still talking') and seems to position the government on the side of the protests. Climate change – Blair put it on the agenda and Bush won't budge. Africa – delivered two out of three of the demands (well at least that's what the rock stars said).

Government ministers joined the march to Make Poverty History (MPH). Oxfam, the leading member of MPH was criticised in the New Statesman for cosying up to the government. Blair is trying to reconfigure the political landscape to position himself on the side of the 'good guys' without actually changing his policies.

The country might have 'wanted' a reduced majority Labour government but it is hard to believe it was for any other reason than that it was the least worst outcome. Voters could imagine how bad Michael Howard's Tories could be, and they couldn't imagine how bad Charles Kennedy's Lib Dems would be. They at least knew what they were getting with Tony Blair and, if they had to have it they wanted less of it.

What of the smaller parties? I'm not sure that the success of George Galloway's Respect can be extrapolated. It is an isolated incident resulting from the combination of Galloway's charisma,

tactical (or Machiavellian) skills, principled opposition to the war, and careful coalition between the left and Moslems. The Greens did reasonably well although a long way short of actually breaking through. The SSP made little progress. At least the far Right's recent gains were reversed and we saw a stake driven through the heart of Kilroy-Silk's Veritas. Perhaps some tentative optimism in these.

So can we learn anything from the last election which can help us analyse opportunities for progressive social movements? I suggest that only from the vantage point of the G8 can we find our lessons, which potentially constitute a realignment in civil society and its relationship to the state.

What has changed as a result of the G8 is the confidence and alignment

of social forces. New opportunities arise across movements with diverse aims and methods: Scotland & England; Green & Red; Liberal & Revolutionary; Anarchists & Socialists, Christians & Moslems. Whilst the electoral successes in Scotland of the SSP and Greens contributed to this development, it was essentially a civil society movement.



The forces of civil society which mobilised around the G8 were impressive. The big three blocks were the development NGOs in the MPH coalition; the alliance of campaigning NGOs, trades unions, radical political parties and other social movements in G8 Alternatives; and the anarchists in Dissent. Whilst these three remained distinct, some groups overlapped between them, and there were many activities by groups and activists with one or less foot in one or more of these. To the soft right of these came Bob Geldof and other rock stars with either a conscience or an ailing career. Without being too cynical, the rock concerts probably raised the issues to a different audience than MPH could have reached, with all their celebrity backing.

What is striking is the extent to which this diverse movement held together. True there were disagreements and mistakes but we pretty well held together. Even at the end it was only the rock stars who broke rank, applauding Blair for his pitiful communiqué. In the months ahead there is a risk that we lose this coalition and go back to our squabbling, but the opportunity is there to learn from it. This could be a major opportunity for realignment in civil society, with new alliances and different kinds of fissures are happening. There has been talk of a Scottish Social Forum emerging from the movement.

In order to grow as a movement we should be honest and humble enough to acknowledge our errors and to evaluate our weaknesses. We should be looking for splits which can separate the enemy from some of its allies.

But who is the enemy and where might we expect the splits to be? If the tectonics are starting to shift, and the movement sees opportunities to drive wedges in new places in civil society, what criteria would we use? We remain a diverse movement and will not agree on everything, or indeed much, but from the experience of the G8 mobilisations we should be openly attempting realignment between ourselves and the neoliberals. And we can draw on the alternative globalisation movement for our inspiration. For starters, here are a couple of criteria which might be used to force changes.

**Humanity versus capital.** The question is about whether policies of groups or movements are fundamentally in favour of the interests of capital or the interests of people. On this there is the opportunity to ally the anarchists, socialists, greens and social democrats, Christians, Moslems and atheist humanists and including many businesses whose interests lie in remaining small and not accumulating.

The G8 leaders clearly put themselves on the pro-capital side of that line with their requirement for liberal economic reform in countries receiving debt cancellation, and Bob 'n' Bono did so too by wagging their tails behind them. This line is no different from the founding charter of principles of the World Social Forum, which is open to '... groups and movements in civil society that are opposed to neoliberalism and to domination of the world by capital ...'

**Popular democracy.** Following on from this is the assumption that the interests of people are better served if they are involved

in constructing the non-capitalist society. This is clearly different from the democracy which Bush and Blair attempt to impose on countries militarily, which privileges the interests of capital.

**Non-violence.** A great deal was talked about non-violence up to and during the G8, but seldom in great depth. Non-violence is not just 'not violent', but contradicts violence. Non-violence as practiced by Gandhi and Martin Luther King exposes the underlying violence in a system and confronts the causes, by contrasting it with the dignity and vulnerability of humanity.

The value of discussing some of these criteria is that it helps to drive wedges in other parts of society which are not natural

allies, but which appear to be showing signs of division along these lines, for example the media and the police.

In its coverage of the G8, the mainstream media were predictably poor. On 6th June, Peter Wilby ironically predicted in the New Statesman: "We must all hope, for the sake both of newspaper sales and of the anti-globalisation movement, that Scotland is, as promised, shrouded in black smoke in July." And much of the media did their damndest to sniff

smoke out, even when it wasn't there. However in the lead-up to the G8 we have seen a small outbreak of good sense in the media, for example actually discussing the issue of climate change: not questioning whether it is happening but rather questioning the motives of those who continue to question whether it is happening.

Even within the police I suspect there are opportunities for realignment. We will all have stories of how badly the police behaved at various times during the G8, but what is more remarkable is the occasions where they behaved well. The police do not have to be the enemy: Revolutions tend to succeed when the security forces change sides and I think we're in for what Raymond Williams termed a Long Revolution. We should be looking for opportunities to drive a wedge between those parts of the police who are on the side of the movement, and those who are not. I don't just mean differentiating the good cops from the bad cops, which is a tactic the police have always used for social control. But I do think there are elements of the police who could be, in the long term, brought over to the progressive movements – who put humanity before capital, defend popular democracy and advocate nonviolence.

This may sound naive, but the point is that we should be mindful of realignments in civil society and the state. Within the progressive movements we have been good at squabbling but we are potentially more united than before the G8. Electoral politics tends to divide us, but when the global neoliberal circus came to town we've shown that we can more or less hold it together in the belief that another world is possible.



*Eurig Scandrett is an environmental activist and member of Democratic Left Scotland*

# ballot boxing

**A battle is underway which will decide the political future of Scotland. Gordon Morgan looks at what is happening with the Arbuthnott Commission.**

For a number of years a small dedicated group of fanatics have been attempting to get rid of the electoral system which delivered proportional representation in the Scottish Parliament and replace it with - a different PR system. These fanatics (the Electoral Reform Society) have, mostly, honourable intentions - they want to introduce a PR system for Westminster. However, they are fixated on a single outcome (STV) and have exaggerated the problems with the current (AMS) system and dismissed the severe reduction in proportionality which is likely to result from their preferred solution.

At the end of this year, Westminster and Holyrood will vote on whether to change the system of election for Holyrood. There is a reasonable prospect that the Scottish Parliament election system will be changed to STV. The consequences of that would be that in the Scottish Parliament elections of 2007 (or 2011) the SSP, Greens and Independents, even if they increase their share of the vote, could be denied representation in the Parliament. There could also be a reduction in representation for women and few effective means to redress the gross under-representation of ethnic minorities.

The current Additional Member system (AMS) was adopted following prolonged discussions in all political parties and in the Campaign for a Scottish Assembly. Of particular influence were conferences held by the Scottish Socialist Movement and discussions within Scottish Labour Action.

There was conflict between the goals of equal representation for Women and Proportional Representation. Many opponents of PR within the Labour Party proposed a system whereby two members would be elected from each Westminster constituency

(one man one woman) - elected by first past the post thus ensuring Labour dominance but delivering gender equality. STV allows voters freedom to choose amongst candidates and evidence shows votes go to well known individuals - usually sitting candidate, at that time largely male. Such a system clearly could not guarantee gender equality, so it, amongst many alternative PR systems, was ditched in favour of the AMS system. The theory - which turned out to be accurate - was that parties would be obliged to field equal number of women in their lists and thus significant numbers of women would be elected as well as broad proportionality of party seats and votes. The White Paper on Scotland which formed the basis of the referendum stated that AMS would be adopted as the electoral system. Labour opponents of PR (and of the Scottish Parliament itself) got clauses inserted allowing for a review of the system after the actual election.

In 2001 Helen Liddle, at the instigation of inveterate opponents of PR, established a consultation on the size of the Scottish Parliament. This became a conflict over the relative powers of Westminster and Holyrood and Helen had to retire bruised having been forced to accept that the parliament required (at least) 129 members. The consultation exposed some bad blood between MSPs elected by first past the post and list MSPs - particularly some SNP MSPs who were accused of posing as alternative constituency MSPs despite losing in the first ballot.

With the demise of Donald Dewar, the loss of Henry and the decision of the Scottish Parliament to adopt STV for Local Government, a new move was made in Westminster to change the electoral system in the Scottish Parliament. Alasdair Darling, at the instigation of a Commons sub committee, set up the Arbuthnott Commission to look at the 'problems' of having four electoral systems in Scotland. Suddenly every group opposed to some aspect of the Scottish Parliament saw a chance to grind their axe. The Lib Dems, who have for at least 40 years campaigned for STV for Westminster, saw a chance to make unstoppable progress. If STV was used in local government, Northern Ireland and could be introduced in Welsh and Scottish parliaments, it would be clear Westminster was the odd one out and might soon introduce STV. Those opposed to PR in its entirety also saw a chance to reintroduce the two members per constituency proposal.

The Arbuthnott commission is due to report by Christmas. Of its suggested electoral systems, it outlines AMS alongside STV, two members per constituency and hybrid systems. Like all commissions it is likely to prove very difficult for them to recommend the status quo; after all, can some improvement not be suggested after a year of deliberation? Nevertheless, even if the commission recommends no change or indeed recommends adoption of STV, the final judgement will be taken by politicians with their own





vested interests. I hope that Socialists in all parties will vote to keep broadly unchanged the current electoral system for Holyrood which has delivered on the objectives set out in the referendum White Paper.

The Cooperative Party is the only party advocating introducing First Past the post (FPTP) elections for the Scottish Parliament, i.e. scrapping PR. A small group of Labour MPs and also Phil Gallie have presented the argument for elections being based on the 59 Westminster constituencies i.e. 2 or 3 persons elected in each. Most of these submissions argue against PR. However, as the commission has indicated recommending first past the post is outwith its remit some propose an alternative vote system. In this system (a form of STV) you would require per cent to be elected. Clearly small parties and most independents wouldn't get a look in. One variant put forward is that around 11 members would be elected nationally on a top up system. This would give only token representation to smaller parties.

A large component of responses – notably Lib Dems, SNP, the Electoral Reform Society, COSLA, Electoral Administrators and – surprisingly - Denis Canavan present the case for STV. I discuss the defects of STV as a system for Holyrood below. The Labour Party (Scotland), Greens, SSP and Conservatives advocate retaining AMS, although the Conservatives prefer FPTP. There are a number of technical changes proposed by some of those supporting AMS. One, largely from Labour, is that there should be only one vote which would be used both for constituency and list; another is for open lists. Such changes, whilst they would require voter education, would not fundamentally change the system. If there is a recommendation to keep the AMS system, a second round of consultations could fine tune the system.

Given the above line up, it is clear that a vote in the Scottish Parliament which reflected party positions would result in the retention of AMS. There are, however, other factors at work.

It is possible that Westminster may decide to unilaterally change the system – Jack Straw seemed to advocate change for Holyrood in recent speeches. This would place Jack McConnell in a difficult position given he is on the record as against change in 2007. The Lib Dems (after 2007) could demand STV as part of a settlement for Government. How Labour would react would depend on many factors. However it would be much preferable for Labour – provided it is the largest party – entering a period of minority Government rather than enter into tawdry deals which can only boost the Lib Dems and SNP whilst undermining Greens, SSP and Independents and possibly Labour itself.

Another outcome will depend on the Arbuthnott report itself. A reasonably strong argument has been made for holding the local government elections and the Parliament elections on different days. COSLA argues for postponing the Local Government Elections to 2008 – indeed it appears to accept AMS provided there was a decoupling of the two elections. The Tories, backed by Greens and SSP, also favour postponing the Local Government elections. Were this to be proposed,

I suspect all other decisions relating to Holyrood would be delayed till after 2007.

The only argument for holding elections on the same date is turnout, which is believed to be higher in a combined election. Against this, voters are confused about the relative responsibilities of Councils and Holyrood. As part of a campaign to strengthen the powers of local government we should favour elections on separate days. Indeed the only substantial argument for changing the voting system for Holyrood is that voters will be confused by having three ballot papers issued at the same time, two of which you tick and another you number candidates one to five (say) in preference order. Although the electoral commission believes voter education can overcome the problems, there is some evidence from the London Mayoral elections that confusion does arise. These objections are overcome if elections are held on different dates.

Over 35 years ago when I first administered an STV system at university it became clear that STV favoured those least disliked rather than those making a positive but controversial statement. Bill Butler makes the following point in his submission; “the distinguishing characteristic of STV technically is always to empower the second and third parties by squeezing out minority parties”. The evidence from the Northern Ireland Assembly elections, held under the rather generous system of six STV seats per constituency, shows that a minimum of around seven per cent and generally eight per cent was required in first preference votes to have any chance of election. This contrasts with the 4.5 per cent in the Holyrood elections using AMS. Had such a system been in use at the 2003 election, the Greens and SSP would almost certainly have had one seat each, the extra seats being taken up in particular by the SNP and LibDems.

STV would also break the constituency link for many MSPs. To be reasonably proportional constituencies would be one-third the size of

Glasgow. To get a high enough profile to be elected, much more money would be spent on candidate promotion. Far from enhancing democratic control, more power would be given to the media and parliamentarians would be even more autonomous from parties. Constituency offices might be more remote from voters, cooperation and dividing representative responsibilities between different parties – something difficult but possible at Local Government level under STV – would be very difficult in large constituencies of 200,000.

The Electoral Reform Society has consistently substituted the term PR (Proportional Representation) when they mean STV. The current AMS system is a PR system. Indeed it has many advantages over STV in being generally more proportional and embodying constituency links. Don't scrap our distinctive system which was widely discussed and voted on as part of the Devolution Settlement and replace it with an inferior system less suited to the diversity of politics in Scotland. ■

*Gordon Morgan is the SSP Constitutional Spokesperson*

# murdoch vs. BBC

## The future of the BBC is uncertain. Robert Beveridge looks at successive attempts by government to reduce the influence of the BBC

In a time when we know the identity of the famous 'Deep Throat' of Watergate fame, it is also worth remembering that the Blair government used similar arguments to those deployed by Nixon's spin doctors when the latter talked about an issue only being of interest to those within the 'beltway'

The discussions about Blair and Campbell's attempts at news management and their reliance on the Hutton whitewash and subsequent pleas that we should 'move on' and that issues other than Iraq were what the country was and should be concerned with as opposed to those articulated by people who were obsessed with claims about WMD etc were reminiscent of Nixon's attempts to set a different news agenda and claim that it was only those liberals at the Washington Post who were concerned and in any case they were biased.

Only this time, it was the BBC and not a newspaper involved and the BBC was and is a cornerstone of the British constitutional settlement. In many ways, the BBC is Britain with all the good and bad involved in that. And the BBC's coverage of politics and the contours of that as it has grappled with devolution, giving what kinds of treatment and space to what range of voices as cultural and political changes have moved us beyond the two part system is reflective of the pressures in and about the balance of political power in the state as a whole.

However, the cause for concern is that Blair is about to do what not even Thatcher in her prime was able to do and that is emasculate the BBC. The consequences for the coverage of politics will be serious as the BBC is gradually privatised and even more populist and the new regulator OFCOM gradually advances and succumbs to the argument that impartiality is a chimera and the new digital universe which allows the consumer more choice- at least that is the theory should allow for partiality. The idea that the coverage of politics should be made more exciting and interesting by being modernised.

It is a Murdochian idea that tv channels, like newspapers, should be allowed to compete in the market and be partial as viewers will have a range of choice, just like that which they obtain in newspapers.

Add to that the work of the Glasgow Media Group in the 1970's and after which argued, with evidence, that the BBC's coverage of politics fell short of full balance and impartiality and in these times of post modernism, you have a potent mix from left and right which combines to undermine the BBC.

The point is that the BBC by culture, tradition and experience aspires to objectivity, balance and impartiality. In doing so it, mostly, successfully manages to be a widely trusted source of news coverage which is inconvenient to and for spin doctors such as Alistair Campbell. If nothing else, New Labour wishes its version of events to be accepted.

The relationship between the BBC in particular and the Prime Minister of the day has always been a fraught one. This is due to the fact that the BBC, of necessity, is an alternative source of truth and news which commands widespread respect and credibility for accuracy and impartiality. Eden, Wilson, Thatcher and Blair have all had their causes celebres in their terms of office.



What makes it worse for them is that they come and go but the BBC goes on. Therefore, each Prime Minister has had, with varying degrees of success, tried to bring the BBC to heel. Each PM and government has had other ways of keeping in tune with newspaper proprietors who constitute another dimension of political power in society.

But always the BBC has been relatively independent and not available for the kind of deals which Blair and Murdoch may have negotiated, without the terms being fully stated, when Blair flew to talk to Murdoch's people before the 1997 election.

Today, Murdoch has a common cause with the government in the introduction and deployment

of neo liberal policies which are designed to cut the BBC down to size. We are at present witnessing an attempt to privatise the BBC by the back door and open up the BBC licence fee to competition with a new quango or even OFCOM being empowered to set the licence fee and parcel it out, initially only a little as a top slice, to bids from a variety of public service broadcasters amongst whom BSkyB will be one as they have recently bought up the Artsworld channel so that they will be able to claim they are a full public service broadcaster and perhaps even more start bidding for commissions from the new Birt/Burns/OFCOM idea of a broadcasting council of the air.

This idea together with the emasculation of the BBC governors via their transfer into a new BBC Trust- which may not be able to work successfully and will not have the cultural and constitutional position and heritage of the governance system which enabled and enables the BBC to stand up, at least some of the time to an over-mighty executive. This is but one of the aspects of an authoritarian government and polity which, as

Thatcher would have had it, brooks no alternative. Even Thatcher in her heyday was not able to fully defeat the most successful nationalised industry we have and have had, namely the BBC. Now Blair et al but not the Department for Culture Media and Sport (DCMS) so far are set on removing a centre of alternative truth and versions of reality.

This matters for the coverage of politics and ideas because a world in which the enemies of the concept of public service broadcasting hold full sway is one in which Orwell's predictions start to come true.

The seductive appeal of achieving pluralism through the new digital broadcasting universe which is merging computers with television is just that. The siren voices cry that we will have more choice and that viewers will tune into the coverage of politics because it will no longer be constrained by artificial notions of balance and thus be more exciting and interesting and sensational and attract larger audience figures.

So we can also have Blair's friend Berlusconi with his tv channels coming into the UK without their fully having to follow our cultures and rules of impartiality. These particular type of tv channels have more licence to be biased as long as they do not, like some middle eastern channels, end up by being too extreme and inciting racial hatred and becoming largely propaganda per se.

Add to this, the siren voices that the coverage of politics must be made more interesting; that it needs to be modernised- shades of Campbell and Blair here- and that politics must connect with people by eschewing an ersatz balance and seriousness and we can reach a populism of programming which can leave behind the famous dictum that we should 'make the good popular and the popular good'

The danger is that the coverage of politics becomes thin and a form of celebrity soap. There is evidence that political campaigning is tending towards the dumbing down and as Tony Benn said many years ago, a concentration on personalities and not policies.

Nowhere is this more exemplified by the debates around the minimum length of party election and party political broadcasts. Until recently, these were supposed to be at least two minutes and forty seconds. Currently, there are proposals to reduce to a minimum of 90 seconds and New Labour would have been happier with a greater number of what are in effect political adverts rather than broadcasts but each coming in at only 30 seconds. So much for the Habermasian public sphere.

Add to this the celebrity driven agendas and the tabloidisation of formerly broadsheet and serious newspapers in format, style and content. Mix in the news management techniques of the spin doctors, the neo liberal agendas of the newspaper owners and the attacks on the BBC, on the concept of due balance, impartiality and objectivity—even as an aspiration in these post modern times, one wonders whether or not voters and citizens are anything more than a species of consumer.

Yet the discussions around the relationship between politics and the media are not just about news management and PR techniques, not just about where we place politics in the schedules and how the treatment helps people to turn onto politics and become more interested. After all, the Ali G show was originally an attempt to make politics more palatable to young adults.

No, much much more is that we need to preserve, never mind enhance the institutional and cultural structures, hard won in all cases, which enable the idea and practice of serious and informed civic journalism to be given space in the schedules, to have sufficient funding to support quality and to exist even if the audiences are not the largest. If we do not have these spaces, these ideas, the strength of public service broadcasting, then we allow the changes being negotiated by the consequences of the new digital technologies to change for ever the ecology of the coverage of politics in the UK in ways which will serve the interests of those such as Murdoch and Berlusconi.

There will be changes of course but they do not need to be such as to impoverish civic society and the citizen and enhance the power of those who already set the agenda in newspapers

Ideally, one would wish the media to report accurately, without fear or favour and in so doing to reflect rather than create public opinion. Its always going to be a chicken and egg situation but in the case of broadcasting, we do have hard fought for rules on balance and impartiality which at least ensure that there is a range, albeit not as large as one would like, of diversity and voice so that the agenda of the spin doctors or Rupert Murdoch is not completely dominant, although the struggle to stop that is continuous.

This is why Hutton was so important and make no mistake, the support for the BBC in the face of that whitewash was a shock to Number 10. There may – but just may be no causal effect between the BBC's strength in reporting the opposition to the war and the current attempts to privatise the BBC and the dismantling of public service broadcasting under OFCOM and the coming White Paper from DCMS

## **There may – but just may be no causal effect between the BBC's strength in reporting the opposition to the war and the current attempts to privatise the BBC**

But there is a correlation and the left, indeed all who believe in the need for news and current affairs which has integrity, need to consider how we can best ensure that we do not have to once again rely on the House of Lords to stand up for pluralism and democracy. Even then, OFCOM are currently in danger of not meeting their statutory duties in ensuring that they look after the interests of the citizen and that their policies maintain and strengthen public service broadcasting. In this they are New Labour to the core and the idea of public service seems to have passed them by.

Please contact your MP and try to ensure that he or she does not pass by the future of broadcasting and the BBC and public service broadcasting as a whole is defended.

**Robert Beveridge is a Lecturer in Media Studies at Napier University**

# hitchhiker's guide to the G8

Writers describe what the G8 week was for them

## Make Poverty History

There has been so much written about the Make Poverty History march that you might think that there was very little left to say. But I've read a lot of the coverage of it and I think there **are** things left to say. For example, it is worth saying that the march I saw seems to be different from the march a lot of the newspapers saw. The march I was on (certainly all the bits I saw) was not typified by guilt-ridden middle class do-gooders looking for a day out. The people around me, the thousands I saw, might very well have felt guilty, but they looked angry. There were thousands of Sunday Mail banners printed to give away (and the tabloids accuse **us** of cynicism), but they were ignored. I only saw one used, and it had the logo torn off. On the other hand, the banners accusing G8 leaders of being war criminals abounded. This was a very political march and make no mistake about it. The second thing to say is that those commentators who think it was the brainchild of pop stars need educated. This is a mass movement of radicals. Make Poverty History will not disappear when the musicians get another gig. The third things to say is that we were not as ignorant as the media believe us to be. Those commentators who have bought the neo-con get-out line that aid is useless because of 'African corruption' are very much more gullible than the people I met. As if we're not corrupt in the West. As if those leaders who let the multinationals act as they please are there by coincidence.

Yes, it was an inspiring day in the sun. But before this moment is rewritten as a jolly, talk to the people that were on it, not those who watched it through a lens. Because most of us meant it.

*Robin McAlpine is Editor of the Scottish Left Review*

## Faslane

The alarm clock starts ringing. I look at the time – 3.30am. First thought – why did I set the alarm for such a daft time? Second thought – it's the Big Blockade at Faslane and there is a coach leaving Edinburgh in half an hour. Get out of the house double-quick time and cycle to the bus rendezvous. Four buses are waiting on Waterloo Place.

I was asked yesterday if I could be in charge of a bus, so I am given a pack of legal briefings and bust cards to hand out. Sleepy campaigners are herded on to buses. Phone call from the other Edinburgh bus pick up at the G8 campsite – chaos – not enough buses. Fifteen minutes later another phone call – more chaos – more buses have arrived, but the Globalise Resistance/SWP folk who had booked 146 places the night before haven't turned up. We now have many more buses than people to fill them. But finally we all meet up and start the convoy to Dumbarton. A random paper seller on our bus asks everyone in turn if we would like a copy of the paper but we sleep.

Dumbarton, 7 AM buses from across Scotland arrive in a random car park and are marshalled by the efficient CND stewards, and we're sent off to South Gate. It's a beautiful morning and the other Greens are at the North Gate, so we decide to go for a walk along the fence to meet up with them. Faslane is as huge and as menacing as ever, with roll after roll of razor wire along the

perimeter to keep out nasty hippy peace protestors. Finally we arrive at the North Gate, which is already blocked by hundreds of people. We spot the Glasgow Greens 'Cocktails and Canapés' affinity group who are handing out freshly squeezed orange juice and nibbles to hungry protesters and attracting a lot of interest from the press who love the incongruity of their dinner jackets and cocktail dresses. Caroline Lucas (the Green MEP), Chris Ballance and Tommy Sheridan are all locked on down the front. There is a samba band playing, flags are being waved and the police are keeping it all very low key. Then a CND steward announces that all four gates are closed! Hundreds of people march off to keep the two small gates to the North closed, but the crowd at the main gate is still the biggest I have ever seen at a Big Blockade.

So we sit, drink tea from Stirling CND's café and chat about the G8 protests that have been and the ones that are coming up. The police seem quite content to let us be. Apparently the shift change was very early – 5.30am – and the base is mostly on holiday. So Faslane is pretty much shut down. And it makes a nice change to be blockading on a lovely warm day, rather than the miserable drizzle of a February blockade. And that's the way it stays, with occasional highlights when someone decides to liven things up by climbing the fence, forcing the police to break from the cover of their vans to make an arrest. My highlight is the Iona Community service, which as ever is a moving reflection on the inhumanity of nuclear weapons. And then at three we head back to our buses, for the drive back to Edinburgh and increasingly worried reports about the police versus protestors at the Carnival for Full Enjoyment on Princes Street...

*Mark Ballard is Green MSP for the Lothians*

## Carnival of Full Deployment

Having fled and rejoined the protest several times in as many hours, I finally turned my back on today's G8-inspired, anti-capitalist Carnival for Full Enjoyment in shame and bewilderment. Shame that I had allowed hysterical, Blair-pleasing fear to send me fleeing for the comfort of home and a dose of pre-mortem Richard Whitely; and bewilderment that the potential for peaceful and meaningful protest had yet again been violated by the police, and what appeared to be faceless anarcho-fascists. Anarcho-fascist; isn't that a paradox?

Anyway, it began benignly enough. A few hundred onlookers milled around the eerily quiet West End of Edinburgh, leaning over barriers to see absolutely nothing for an hour or so, and expectant protestors did much the same. There was little to differentiate observer from protestor at this point, except the odd Gap carrier bag and adherence to the pedestrian rules of the Highway Code. The sense of expectation mounted, and a vague, half-hearted procession embarked along Princes Street towards a blockade Adolf would surely have been proud of. Police vans, officers and mobile CCTV units stood between us and another group of protestors amassed on the other side of the border. Sorry, police line. Fortunately, this friendly stand-off took place outside Starbucks, and some vicious insults were good-naturedly hurled at the frothy-lipped punters gawping down from the

safety of one floor up. The masses swelled, and as drums were beaten, slightly embarrassed daylight dancing occurred, which is always fun. Meanwhile, back at the front line, some peachy-keen protestors serenaded the officers with a rustic rendition of 'Fuck the Police' and everyone became restless. Nonetheless, there was little expectation of violence from those around, despite the lyrical lashing and the bloated police presence.

Somehow, after more aimless ambling and sporadic chants of what sounded like, but couldn't possibly have been, 'Buckfast!' and 'Pasties!', there was a sudden charge by the police and everyone was forced to scatter. The mood changed. Police vans hurtled unnecessarily through the disorganised crowd, and the casualty count began. Strangely, some people objected to being tossed aside by large vehicles, and were rightly reprimanded for such piffling concerns with big sticks. I'm not ashamed to admit that I ran like the big Jessie that I am, although I joined in again later. I also admit that the absence of an organised agenda or route for the protest lent an uneasy air to the event, and many of us were unsure as to the intention of the 'organisers', let alone the police. Couple this with big men on even bigger horses raging towards us whilst simply standing chatting, apparently an offence in New Britain, and it's easy to see why some feared for their lives. However, a lack of information is no excuse for irrational behaviour, from protestors or police.

Eventually, Princes Street Gardens became a target, and passer-by and protestor were forcibly merged by tightly controlled entry and exit points. Whilst many officers were helpful, and as desperate for it all to pass off without the need for physical exertion as any middle-aged fat man would be, many went off message, reliving weekend fantasies that they are actually US soldiers in '60s Vietnam. Police chiefs have been talking excitedly for weeks about their well-equipped, well-resourced, well-briefed army of officers, trained to 'cope with' this week's events and any contingencies. In my twin roles as protestor and flâneur, I certainly saw evidence of the first two elements, but none whatsoever of these public servants being briefed or trained to cope with, or serve the public. What I did witness were lines of riot police, supported by mounted officers, charging towards static crowds, repeatedly. Even 200 metres or so from the action, police officers harangued mothers with kids, swore at people who asked for advice (including me), and shouted so hard that shares in Tixylix are guaranteed to rocket. Well-briefed, well-trained, well-'ard.

As I watched sadly from the sidelines, I overheard a young girl ask her mum what was going on and why everyone kept charging each other. The woman replied that it was a big game of British Bulldogs, and she was absolutely right. The dogged determination of the police was matched by that of the peaceful protestors, and the game could have been played with the minimum of beastliness and the need for spankings. Everyone's a winner. But, the right and ability to protest with passion and relative safety disappeared when unprovoked police aggression was met with the disruptive retaliatory actions of the masked marauders. This disparate, yet connected group had an insidious presence, claiming anarchist ideology whilst ordering free-willed protestors to take part in less co-operative direct action. Stirring up conflict and marching purposefully through what was, after all, supposed to be a goddamn **carnival**, these intimidating figures diffused the full enjoyment, and ensured the full deployment of police officers, dogs, horses and fear. Their dominant, aggressive form of protest did nothing to advance the anti-capitalist cause,

or encourage middle-Britain to believe that protest equals good, and merely gave the establishment and media further fuel for their hate-filled bigotry. Thanks for that.

Frankly, it crossed my mind that the reluctance to openly publicise and organise the event, and the vagueness of the protest plan was all deliberate, and us peace-lovin' assholes had been duped by those peace-hatin' assholes, used to bolster the numbers and potential arena for violence. Hmm, sounds familiar. Who else keeps the masses in the dark, and then forces them to do their bidding? I hope this is my mental illness rearing its ugly head again, and that the true organisers had admirable intentions. Although any protest can kick off, the aggressive, offensive tactics of both the police and the masked minority didn't engender a satisfactory conclusion. Sixty arrests apparently. It might not sound many, but the cost of keeping these dangerous criminals/innocent bystanders off the streets – our streets, mind – has been any trust built up through the Make Poverty History march between G8 protestors and police, and G8 protestors and the public. MPH went off without a hitch, as if it had been organised by The Waltons, populated by angels, and overseen by God. I suspect this dichotomy has something to do with public and establishment expectations, driven by the loaded language of the media leading up to these events. Come on, who doesn't want to make poverty history? Sir Bob; Live 8; Africa; Bono – count me in! Anti-capitalism? What, sorry – I've got kids, a mortgage, a coke habit, psychiatry bills to pay etc. And anyway, I'm no anarchist! It seems average Joe and the masked avengers have misinterpreted anarchy as necessitating violence and the ultimate surrender of all that's familiar and established. Bloody hell.

Walking home, figuratively beaten by cops and criminals, I was astounded at the volume of negative comments emanating from passers-by about the protestors. Many appeared logistically unaffected by the protest itself and, apparently, logically unaffected by its message. All they knew was that disruption had occurred, anarchists were involved, and nothing's worth that, is it? I almost understand the disruptive actions of the rogue element, if that's the extent to which people are willing to entertain alternative thinking. The frustration of failing to successfully communicate an idea could drive a person to madness, but people still die for the right to speak out, peacefully or otherwise. Not here, granted, at least not at the moment, but it happens, is happening. Surely it is our right to protest peacefully, and our duty to do so because it is our right. I could go on. Although, for this to work, someone has to inform the police. Good luck.

*'Elle Matheuse' is senior lecturer in her own home, and a burgeoning political activist/writer*

### Dungavel

Dungavel detention centre was emptied of people seeking asylum before the G8 demo on July 5. Whilst Blair and Brown were trying to recast themselves as the saviours of the World's poor and particularly Africa, it would have been rather embarrassing for their deceit to be laid naked by the faces of Africans fleeing persecution and poverty gazing on the demonstrators from the windows of fortress Dungavel.

Those removed from Dungavel will not have been released and granted asylum. They will have been transferred to Tinsley

House, Yarlswood or deported even faster to face the ravages of hunger, disease, poverty, persecution and war they were trying to flee. Given Britain's colonial and imperial role in creating and perpetuating Africa's problems, the imprisoning of Africans, or anyone else, whose only crime is seeking refuge in the home of their oppressors lays bare the hypocrisy of Blair, Brown and Labour. Eight years in power and we have detention without trial not just for adults but children too. The Ay family, incarcerated and thrown out by Britain have now been granted leave to stay in Germany - as a direct result of the inhumane treatment they received in Britain.

As the G8 pampered prime ministers and presidents, including the biggest threat to humanity, George W Bush, were making free passage to Gleneagles at massive expense, those who made their way to peacefully and legally protest against the abomination of Dungavel on July 5 were greeted by the full force of the state. First protestors were frustrated by lengthy diversions. Police road blocks ensured only one way into Dungavel. Protestors were slowly filtered through stop and search 'turnstiles'. Whole buses were stopped and their occupants turned over. Groups of people who had the misfortune to wear gear that normally warrants just a glance outside the GOMA in Glasgow suffered the most severe repression - corralled in the open countryside by cops in full riot gear for up to an hour.

As I finally arrived at the demo- one hour later than it would normally take me, my rather untidy handbag became the focus of a stand off when an officer demanded to search it. I've been to many demos at Dungavel when there have actually been detainees there. There is a massive security fence like you'd expect at any prison. That day there was the fence, protestors and police in the middle of the countryside. The biggest threat to anyone were the swarms of midges. Perhaps that explains the helmets, visors and shields. Maybe they thought they'd find some midge repellent in my bag. I asked him why the search had been ordered. I asked to speak to a senior officer. They admitted that, well in advance of this planned, permitted, peaceful and legal demo, Section 60 of the Criminal Justice Act had been blanketly applied. Under this Act the police are bestowed awesome and unaccountable powers. They need have no grounds for suspicion of individuals but can compel them to identify themselves, give personal information, be searched, photographed and filmed. I established that I wouldn't be jailed that day, refused to comply and was charged. I look forward to my day in court.

Handbag unrifled I finally arrived at the rallying point. Shoulder to shoulder police, ringed protestors in. Behind them stood back-up riot cops, horses and dogs. So this was what democracy looked like. Despite this state repression speakers and protestors did what they came to do; blast Blair, his government. and his party for their barbarity, their racism and their hypocrisy. And continue to lay the basis for their downfall and a future where the peoples of the world are as free to move as big business and money is now.

***Carolyn Leckie is SSP MSP for Central Scotland***

### **Auchterarder**

Heading towards a demonstration that had gained heavy, mostly negative, media coverage was a bit uncomfortable even for the most experienced demonstrators, especially after the early morning news reports of a 'community under siege'.

We knew that any discomfort would be lessened as soon as we met up with the rest of the massive contingent that would leave Glasgow for Auchterarder and onto Gleneagles later that morning. But first of all our Inverclyde 'Spirit of '67' group had to travel on public transport with what we thought might be a hostile audience if they had taken in even a fraction of the media's portrayal of events in the Perthshire village thus far that morning. We needn't have worried. The collective fears of our group, who were all together for the first time since the amazing anti-war demo on 15 February in Glasgow, were easily allayed by our fellow passengers comments both during our journey and, especially, as they left the train - "I'd be joining you but we needed cover at work and I lost out to colleagues who are going"; "Stay safe"; "Look after yourselves"; "Have a great time - remember to stick together". Clearly some of the media messages had gotten through. There seemed to be some expectation of trouble but not, however, to be caused by protestors whose only weapons were face paint and fabric flowers. So far so good.

When we reached George Square, some tension was clearly evident. Police had apparently been telling Edinburgh demonstrators that G8 Alternatives had cancelled the march and giving the impression that there would be little point in us travelling. Those of us who had witnessed seriously heavy-handed tactics earlier in the week were nervous. At the Stop the War demo on the Sunday, we'd been forced to beg to be allowed to join it (after much persuasion that we were 'peaceful') and at Dungavel the day before we witnessed a level of anti-German hostility the like of which had not been since Euro 1996! To us this seemed yet another wrecking operation - an attempt at not just de-legitimising our protest but at making it illegal and hence opening up the potential that we'd get the opportunity to experience Orgreave-, Wapping- and, now, Edinburgh-style justice first hand.

Panic over and we set off singing. We weren't that far outside Glasgow when, not for the last time that day, the phrase 'the spirit of Florence' was used. What this meant could only be fully understood once we had reached Auchterarder itself and had our first experience with the 'community under siege'. Not much evidence of people barricaded inside their homes. In fact, as the first coach in a convoy of hundreds, we felt more like Liverpool bringing home the European Cup than a feared (even hated) band of rebels hell-bent on the destruction of their community. The smiling faces, the enthusiastic waves and 'thumbs ups' couldn't have been more welcoming. Little of the battering down the hatches, too, as both the Spar and the chippy fully embraced the only visitors they'd get this week desperate for a pudding supper and a can of Tenants. The Gleneagles lot would, after all, be well looked after.

Maybe we imagined it, but we all agreed on the way home that there were special smiles from locals for the songs that our group had made up, especially, our version of the Peter Kay/Tony Christie hit that has become 2005's anthem:

Is this the way to Auchterarder?  
There's a gang there wanted for murder.  
Is this the way to Auchterarder?  
Where Tony's cronies wait for me.

For us, at least, and perhaps for the good people of Auchterarder it became the anthem of a lively, colourful, yet very political,

Gleneagles protest.

*Tricia McCafferty is Associate Lecturer in the Social Sciences Faculty at the Open University*

### And inside Gleneagles...

A recent report from Cape Town University found that the poorest six per cent of the population of sub-Saharan Africa live on fourteen pence per day. Dinner bed and breakfast for two at Gleneagles Hotel comes in at six hundred and twenty five pounds a night. You couldn't make it up.

(The Prime Minister's study at Chequers, the night before the G8 summit... Enter Carruthers, a Foreign Office Mandarin.)

Carruthers: I've got the communiqué here for the end of the G8 summit, Prime Minister.

PM: Hang on a jiffy, Carruthers, we haven't actually met yet...

Carruthers: I think you'll find it's a vote winner, PM...

PM: In that case read it immediately.

Carruthers: "The leaders of the G8 countries are delighted to announce that they have decided to make poverty history."

PM: Steady on, isn't that a bit of a porky?

Carruthers: Talk is cheap, Prime Minister.

PM: I'm glad you brought that up, Carruthers. I am a bit worried about the choice of Gleneagles.

Carruthers: You've lost me there, PM.

PM: Isn't it rather associated with the wilder excesses of conspicuous consumption?

Carruthers: So?

PM: Wont that make us look a little out of touch?

Carruthers: Prime Minister, the Foreign Office has just spent one million pounds building a security fence around Gleneagles to make bloody sure you're out of touch.

PM: It wont look good, Carruthers.

Carruthers: You'll hardly notice it, sir. We've covered it up with camouflaged hessian.

PM: I mean it wont look good when we all sit down to a dinner that could feed your average African family for a year.

Carruthers: Really Prime Minister? They must have very small appetites.

PM: Not the actual dinner, you idiot. The price of the dinner!

Carruthers: We could hardly ask President Chirac to nip down to the Auchterarder 'chippy' to queue up with the 'Jimmies' for a mealie pudding supper.

PM: Auchterarder?

Carruthers: Think Soweto with heather.

PM: It is a disgrace that in the 21st. century places like Soweto still exist.

Carruthers: Very good, PM, that's got a definite ring to it... I'll stick it in the communiqué.

PM: We must double Aid from the G8 to Africa....

Carruthers: The Germans wont buy it...

PM: We must remove tariffs on African farmers and faze out subsidies to European farmers...

Carruthers: The French wont buy it...

PM: We must write off Africa's debts...

Carruthers: The Americans wont buy it...

PM: We must stamp out bribery and replace corrupt dictators with democratic government...

Carruthers: BP wont buy it, Standard Charter wont buy it, de Beers wont buy it...

PM: For God's sake, Carruthers, what am I going to tell Sir Bob?

Carruthers: I will resist saying "I told you so", Prime Minister, but giving that punk Geldof a knighthood was asking for trouble.

PM: You're just being a snob.

Carruthers: I try my best, Sir.

PM: You're living in the past. Things are changing, Carruthers. The public is demanding action, not words! There's a new wind of change and this time it's sweeping through the rich world as well as Africa. Poverty, The Environment, Climate Change... we have a moral obligation to face up to these challenges and we have the resources, the skills, the inventiveness and the determination to do it.

Carruthers: I say, bravo Prime Minister! I take it that is for the communiqué?

PM: If there is one thing I cannot stand it's a cynic.

Carruthers: No, no. Even better, sir, put it in your next manifesto. I am sure it would be very popular.

PM: You think so?

Carruthers: Perhaps a tad less vote winning will be your proposals on how to pay for this sudden altruistic fervour. Let's see. Climate change. 10 pence on a gallon of diesel...

PM: The hauliers wont buy it...

Carruthers: A pound a gallon on aviation gasoline. Adios Ryanair to Barcelona...

PM: The punters wont buy it...

Carruthers: The Environment. All plastic wrapping in supermarkets banned...

PM: Tesco's wont buy it...

Carruthers: Poverty. Standard rate of income tax 50 pence. Tax on earnings over 100,000 – 60 pence. Tax on earnings over 200,000 – seventy pence. Minimum wage £10 an hour. Foreign aid

doubled.

PM: Nobody will buy that.

Carruthers: And the communiqué, Prime Minister?

PM: Read it to me again, Carruthers.

Carruthers: "The leaders of the G8 countries are delighted to announce that they have decided to make poverty history."

PM: That sounds good to me. ■

*David McLennan is a writer*

# the missing books

## Robin McAlpine explains why the Scottish Left Review has set up a publishing imprint to encourage radical Scottish writing

What is going on in Scotland? For a long time Scotland was one of the radical hubs of political life in Britain. A hundred years ago the Red Clydesiders shook the political foundations of Britain and provoked the fear in the British establishment that it might not be quite as untouchable as once it believed itself to be. Ten years ago Scotland was pioneering a process of consensus-building which sowed deep seeds of serious constitutional change in Britain which all the efforts of the then government (and some of the instincts of the government which followed) could not prevent. In between these times Scotland provided a focus for all kinds of radical thinking on nuclear weapons, nuclear energy, environmental issues, matters of national identity, poverty reduction and much, much more.

So if we were hunting for a radical Scotland now, where would we look? Of course there is much going on in Scotland and it would be foolish to write off Scotland's contribution to the anti-war movement and the global justice agenda (for example). But signs of Scotland leading (or even seeking to lead) UK-wide or international debate are few and far between. And, perhaps more alarmingly, the evidence of Scotland engaging with itself to identify paths forward to a better, more radical future is not strong. Again, it would be a mistake to suggest that nothing is happening, nothing improving. But abolishing tuition fees, paying teachers a fair wage, providing dignity in care for our elderly, banning fox hunting are more about mitigating unacceptable and blatant wrongs than they are about creating a new, progressive future for Scotland. There are four political parties in Scotland which between them make up much of the Parliament and almost all of the Parliament's decision-making processes. All four have concluded that promoting the interest of business is Scotland's future. It would be an unbalanced Parliament if no-one was making the case for business; but then isn't that what the Conservatives are for?

There seems to be a strange gap in Scottish political life. It's not that there has been an exodus of people with radical political views. Certainly some of them seem to have been co-opted one way or another by the Scottish Parliament itself now that there is a decision-making entity in the country which hold power and the purse, and which does not always welcome radicalism never mind direct criticism (those who thought devolution would kill independence stone dead surely didn't think it was going to kill all dissenting views stone dead?) But there remain in Scotland many people who would like to work towards a better, fairer, more imaginative Scotland than the one we currently have.

So what is the nature of the problem? Let me offer three little thought experiments to illustrate some of the dimensions of what appears to be a (temporary) lethargy. For the first of these, imagine that in 1989 there was a real and significant opportunity

to overturn an unpopular and unjust piece of legislation which victimised people (particularly young people) on the basis of their sexuality. Let us imagine that this could be done against the wishes of a Thatcher government by Scottish local government. The first question to ponder is who in Scotland would have tried to obstruct this? The 'left-leaning' biggest selling national newspaper? The churches? Some obsessive businessman? It is pretty hard to imagine. Frankly, there would probably have been a moan in the Daily Mail about the usual 'politically-correct councils' and the whole minor matter would have disappeared in a matter of weeks. But that wasn't what happened ten years later in 1999. By then a extremely well-funded coalition of media interests, reactionary groupings and conservative individuals put so much pressure on law-makers that the only just held ground (in fact, they ceded quite a lot of it).

What do we learn from this? Well, it certainly seems that the public management of Scotland is no longer something which the powerful interest groups observed from a distance with a lofty disinterest. The lessons of the work of Corporate Watch and others are not yet being learned; Scotland is now a target for power in a way it wasn't previously. The left in Scotland (and in particular the centre left which is suspicious of anything that sounds like conspiracy or paranoia) has not really woken up to the fact that creating a centre of power in Scotland has brought with it the barely-visible real power which is now the major force which directs policy in Western democracies. Scotland is being controlled in ways it didn't use to be. The ownership of media has shifted and while the excellent Sunday Herald is a breath of fresh air, the Scotsman group is now as avowedly neo-conservative as its sister paper the Daily Telegraph. Corporate lobbyists are in and around the Parliament, not so much asking for things (many things the corporate lobby wants are not within the remit of the Parliament) as making sure it 'doesn't do anything stupid'. Where Scotland was once viewed as a provincial matter of no great concern to big financial interests, the pressure to avoid radicalism if you want to be considered mainstream has increased enormously. We are in a much less

open country than we were a decade ago.

A third thought experiment. This is being written on the day that London won the bid to host the 2012 Olympics. Many will find the whole process (irrespective of which city won) somewhat distasteful. It has become so hopelessly money-driven that at times the modern Olympiad looks like a jumped-up advertising hoarding. In some regards it seems almost like the antithesis of the Olympic ideal; people

competing in a spirit of camaraderie on a level playing field to discover who can run fastest, throw longest, jump highest. So why doesn't someone take a stand? What if Scotland put a bid in for 2016? What if it bid on the basis of an Olympic Games with no sponsorship? What if we offered to build decent sporting

**Scotland's political culture is unlikely to be a healthy (never mind vibrant) one unless we can have people who want to read and write about the possibility of a better Scotland.**



facilities and provide hospitality for the worlds best athletes? What if we asked them to come and run and not to sell anything?

No, of course we wouldn't win, but we'd make an awful lot of friends around the world, and it would probably all prove a lot less expensive than marching thousands of pipers through New York. But can you imagine us doing it? Or even considering it? No, because we have come to take ourselves enormously seriously in Scotland. It is almost as if we feel like a child dressed up in his father's clothes, desperately trying to act more like what we think a grown up is than any grown up would (such as the enormous overreaction to a minor Parliamentary protest by the SSP). But we're aren't children and we don't have to absorb or mimic the pomposity of the London establishment. Scotland has hemmed in its sense of itself and it is inhibiting us from thinking about ourselves.

A final thought experiment. Name five books on Scottish politics, society, environment or (the politics of) culture which inspired you or which you consider to be valuable to you. How many of them were published since devolution? In fact, can you name five books of even middling quality and even moderate radicalism which have been published since devolution? Can you even name two or three? I have used this as snap, trick questions when debating with friends the state of Scottish politics. Many are unable even to come up with one piece of worthwhile political writing to emerge from Scotland in the post-devolution era.

## Name five books on Scotland which inspired you or which you consider to be valuable to you. How many of them were published since devolution?

So what? So everything. Political change comes in many ways, but it is always driven by the recognition of the need for change

(analysis) and for a model of how we can change things (ideas). In Scotland in the early days of this latest century, we are sorely lacking in analysis and we are sorely lacking in ideas. This is a particularly bemusing position for us to be in. Of course we're preaching to the converted by pointing this out to the readers of the Scottish Left Review, but there is an enormous amount of interest in radicalism out there. Radical polemics have become so sought after in the United States that they have

started grossing big at the multiplex box office. The range of dissident political magazines and websites in the US is enormous and continually expanding. And the market for radical writing is growing all the time – you need only browse briefly at the Scottish Radical Book Fair or in Wordpower. As a more direct comparison, even Wales has seen an upsurge in radical political writing. There is so much good writing and so many Scots who want to read it. So why aren't we writing it?

So make no mistake, a country which does not have a lively debate about its place and its future is not one which is likely to innovate or change much. And if debate is to be lively then it cannot all be within a narrow strata which is defined as the 'mainstream' – which has come to mean a very narrow political spectrum which strays very little from the 'corporate consensus' of modern government. It does no harm to have a debate about

Scotland's future which is built on the very dubious claim that Scotland and the Scots somehow 'lack confidence'; what is harmful if this constitutes the **only** debate. It is radical ideas which change societies. Even if they are not realised, it is the radical ideas which put pressure on the 'mainstream' to change. The idea of a welfare state was once considered extremist and barely five years ago the American neo-conservative project was viewed as on the edges of political debate in America. Writing – books – are important. They have been the source of new ideas and the starting point of change around the world since before the time of the Bible. Scotland's political culture is unlikely to be a healthy (never mind vibrant) one unless we can have people who want to read and write about the possibility of a better Scotland.

On the basis of 'if you build it, they will come', we've therefore launched the Scottish Left Review Press. We have published our first book and are now working on a number of others. And we want you to become involved. Of course we hope you'll buy some of our books, but we hope some of you will bring book ideas to us as well. You can find details about how to submit proposals on page 19 of this issue, or you can get information from our website ([www.slrpress.org](http://www.slrpress.org)).

The question is not what is going on in Scotland; it is what do you **think** should be going on in Scotland. Let us know. ■

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



# the forgotten socialists?

Mark Hirst looks at recent developments in the Northern Irish peace process and asks if it is time for Scottish socialists to make links with Sinn Fein

The IRA has fought a “just and successful” campaign. That was the assessment of British intelligence in mid June 2002 following a remarkable briefing I attended in the north of Scotland. I recall glancing around the room trying to catch the expression on the faces of other delegates, mainly police officers, senior port and Council officials like myself. I was desperately trying to assess if they were as astonished as I was to hear this from a representative of the principle agency responsible for fighting the IRA.

The assessment stood at complete odds with all of the propaganda generated by the British government and UK media over the past 33 years. What was equally astonishing was that no one in the room seemed the least bit surprised by the statement from this MI5 intelligence officer, who for legal reasons I cannot name. “The IRA remains the biggest threat to British national security,” he added, almost a year into the ‘War on Terror’ which was supposedly targeting the Al Qaeda network. It was also less than four weeks before Blair started to prepare public opinion for war in Iraq, yet the official security assessment was that despite a five-year IRA ceasefire, republicans still represented the biggest risk to Britain’s national security.

The last 10 years has seen some of the most fundamental and historic changes within republicanism in living memory, although the origins of those changes lie firmly in the late 1970s when Gerry Adams rose to lead Europe’s foremost revolutionary republican socialist movement. Publicly Sinn Fein remains under continuous barrage, attacked and derided by political opponents on both sides of the partition line. Among many, and certainly amongst most unionists, Sinn Fein is genuinely hated and despised. Both the Irish and British press are particularly ferocious in their coverage of the party. Yet despite this, or possibly even because of it, Sinn Fein’s popularity among many ordinary Irish working class people has grown steadily and in many ways looks unstoppable. Whilst publicly opponents of Sinn Fein do all they can to link republicans to criminality, even when real evidence of such links is thin or non-existent, privately there is a detectable admiration for what the republican movement has managed to achieve through the lowering of the armalite and elevation of the ballot box. Organisationally Sinn Fein comes second to none and without exception the public face of republicanism sings with one unified voice, although privately discussion is often heated over the strategic direction of the movement.

In the Republic of Ireland the two main political parties, Fine Gael and Fianna Fail. Both have clearly felt the electoral pinch from Sinn Fein and reacted to it by trying to reappropriate the language of republicanism which only a few years ago, and certainly before the ceasefire, would have been unimaginable. Representatives of both these parties are trying to reassure a growingly sceptical electorate that they really are republicans too. It’s not a strategy which looks like it’s winning many converts though, as the electorate continue to vote for the genuine article. In many ways both Fianna Fail and Fine Gael have been tarnished by accusations of corruption and this,

somewhat ironically, has added to Sinn Fein’s credibility, notably among the youth vote of Ireland. “These are men and women” one commentator recently said of Sinn Fein, “who have, been prepared to be imprisoned for life or even die for Ireland. There are few politicians who can match that commitment.”

It’s that level of perceived dedication to the cause which gives an integrity to Sinn Fein which their opponents can’t hope to emulate. But its not just Sinn Fein’s credibility, built on an imprisonment or death commitment, which is gaining them new converts. The party’s long-standing commitment to a socialist Ireland is seeing it build firm inroads into Ireland’s extensive working class communities. This support base is one that has long been nurtured by the current leadership of Sinn Fein which directed the movement firmly to the left in the late 1970s. Whilst consistently denying being out and out Marxist, Sinn Fein’s solid socialist principles percolate the movement and that translates itself into a wide variety of community-based activity at grass roots level. It’s a strategy that has seen Sinn Fein working in and with communities at all levels, developing housing co-operatives, youth programmes, adult training and so on and it’s a strategy which is clearly delivering results.

The wider picture, though, continues to revolve around the continuation of the peace process. Right wing unionists have repeated the reactionary call of ‘never, never, never’ with Sinn Fein. Iain Paisley’s demand for “action not words” from the IRA, an organisation whose definition of ‘action’ means a return to war, seems hopelessly absurd. Comparisons to other international peace processes seem to support Sinn Fein’s assessment that the issue of decommissioning is a smokescreen for a more intransigent position of outright opposition to Sinn Fein from British unionists.

Roelf Meyer was formerly on the negotiating team for South Africa’s ruling white National Party and oversaw the talks that led to the establishment of a democratic South Africa. He later became part of the Government of National Unity following the removal of apartheid. “People need to start thinking out of their boxes if the process is to be advanced,” says Meyer. “There are still big questions for the two main sides in this situation to reconcile. It is easy to become entrenched and in so doing hold back the process of lasting peace.” On decommissioning Meyer has a stark message for unionists and indeed for the British Government which appears to have acquiesced with the stalling of the process over the question of IRA arms. “The issue of decommissioning has become a focus and a useful tool not to advance the situation. It is in my view the wrong focus. In South Africa the ANC did not fully decommission all of its weapons until it was in power for two years. If you are serious about peace, then you need to think out of the box. If you reach a difficult issue, like decommissioning, you argue, you try and persuade, but if that becomes an obstacle to delivering lasting peace, then you must mentally put it to the side and move on.”

Despite the rhetoric over the issue the republican movement has made remarkable steps towards greater and significantly,

**exclusive** involvement in politics. For a revolutionary organisation committed to the goal of a united Irish socialist republic the notion that it could even consider decommissioning before that objective was clearly in reach is surely unmistakable evidence of the 'out of the box' thinking which Meyer and others believe necessary to move the process on. Of course the IRA's greatest strength has always lain not with its potential to wage war but in its knowledge of how that war should be executed. Precisely how you decommission such knowledge remains one of the big unanswered questions for hard-line unionists and certain covert wings within the British establishment determined to see IRA volunteers parading the streets in 'sackcloth and ashes'. Of course the underlying agenda for them is to see a return to the comfort zone of war where the real political issues of inequality and the origins of the artificial statelet in the North of Ireland are obscured by the dust and the bullets of bloody conflict. What is certain is that without the IRA and specifically without the current leadership of Sinn Fein there would be no process at all. It's a highly uncomfortable conclusion to reach for many brought up on a diet of tabloid headlines such as "IRA butchers killed my family", but there is no escaping the reality; Sinn Fein has delivered its end of the peace bargain so far and its increasing electoral mandate is ample evidence that nationalists are endorsing the political strategy in growing numbers.

For socialists in Scotland the Irish republican movement's socialist ideological foundations can be deeply uncomfortable. Why this should be the case remains a bit of a mystery, but no doubt the endless stream of anti-republican propaganda has left its impression on the socialist cause here. Certainly the gulf between the 'civic consensus' in Scottish politics and Irish revolutionary politics may never have been wider with at times utter incomprehension on the part of socialists in Scotland to the political tactics and electoral rise of Sinn Fein. Socialism

in Scotland has never been able to reconcile or even remotely understand the armed struggle element that has been part and parcel of Irish republican resistance for close on 100 years. The "gas and water socialism" referred to by Edinburgh born James Connolly is still evident among most Scots socialist thinkers even today with an over reliance on the trade union movement which has pushed the question of national independence out of sight and in so doing left the working class substantially where it was. Armed revolution has never seriously been an option in Scotland and in the current political climate is never likely to be.

There is little doubt the current phase of the peace process is in some difficulty, although clearly Sinn Fein has the final demographic ace still to play with a guaranteed nationalist majority among the population of the North in less than 15 years. With a major statement from the IRA due imminently we could see the clearest indication yet that the armed struggle has served its purpose and if they play it canny, Sinn Fein could once again be the principal political force across the island of Ireland. Irish republicanism has a huge vested interest in pursuing a purely peaceful democratic agenda, which the statement from the IRA is expected to reflect. They know their day is coming and they understand that perhaps for the first time in Irish history it's achievable without dying or being imprisoned for life. If their choice is patently to embrace the democratic process, flawed as it is, then all self proclaimed democrats both socialist and right wing, must offer the hand of welcome. It won't be easy for those who have been heavily indoctrinated in anti-IRA propaganda but there is no other option but perhaps a terrible and bloody return to war. And no one in their right minds wants that. ■

*Mark Hirst is a member of the Belfast based Victims and Survivors Trust; a registered charity that offers counselling and support for people from all sides who are directly affected by the conflict in Ireland*

## call for radical scottish writers

The Scottish Left Review, Scotland's leading left-of-centre political journal, has launched a new publishing venture. The Scottish Left Review Press aims to encourage and support writers looking at Scottish politics, society and culture from a radical perspective. It is a non-profit venture which is not linked to any political party or organisation but seeks to provide a vehicle for all left-of-centre political thinking in Scotland.

The Scottish Left Review press is looking for writers. We are looking for original writing...

... from a progressive or radical left perspective

... about politics, society and culture which, while not necessarily narrowly about Scotland, will add to the debate here

... is of broad interest beyond any specialist area

We do not intend to publish fiction or poetry. Writers may submit proposals, synopses, extract with synopses or manuscripts with synopses.

Synopses can be mailed to Scottish Left Review Press, 46 High Street, Biggar, ML12 6BJ or emailed to [contact@slrpress.org](mailto:contact@slrpress.org). Further information is available at [www.slrpress.org](http://www.slrpress.org)



# sex as work, work as sex

## Gregor Gall charts the progress of sex industry unionisation

Throughout many countries of the world in recent years, sex workers, ranging from prostitutes, escorts, and massage parlour workers, to strippers/exotic dancers/lap dancers, pornographic models, pornographic actors/actresses, and sex chatline telephone operators, have begun to join trade unions for the first time. This ranges from the US and Canada to Britain, Germany, the Netherlands and Australia and New Zealand. The basis of this phenomenon has been the development of widespread and collective grievances. But critically, it is predicated on some of those who sell sex and sexual services putting forward the claim to be 'workers'. This comes from viewing sex workers as workers whose labour, whether emotional or erotic, is deemed to have two qualities. It is of a sufficient level of moral legitimacy, and it has a social worth as a form of employment that is seen to be comparable to other forms of labour and paid employment to be deemed worthy of, and acceptable, to organise. The perspective is also of sex workers sell sexual services and not their bodies and persons **per se**. A distinction is not made between acts which involve the selling of sex and acts of selling sexual stimulation, between those acts which involve entering a body, acting on another body or entering personal spaces and those which involve the production of imagery. Allied to this, sex work is viewed as comprising work that **can be** socially useful and **can** provide job satisfaction, personal fulfilment, empowerment and self-actualisation; where becoming a sex worker **can be** a genuine life choice.

The conditions of this potentiality are acknowledged to be existent in the present and to be potential greatly enhanced in the future under different conditions. However, it is recognised that alongside these potential benefits, there are downsides in terms of violence, stigmatisation, poor pay and conditions of employment, and job insecurity. This sex work discourse is one that has been developed by sex workers themselves and their supporters such as liberal and libertarian feminists (and not sex industry employers). Sex workers are not viewed necessarily as victims or as helpless. Rather, they are conferred with rights and legitimacy. What makes the manifestations of this discourse so notable is that sex workers are fighting themselves to achieve its further dissemination and influence.

Before the mid-1980s, any collective organisations of sex workers was of prostitutes where prostitutes themselves and an array of supporters constituted pressure groups to campaign for the general improvement in the conditions of prostitutes. The modern prostitute's rights movement began in the San Francisco in 1973 with creation of COYOTE (Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics). It sought to repeal existing prostitution law, empower prostitutes to bargain with their employers, educate the public on prostitution, end stigmatisation and campaign for health provision. A series of similar organisations, often affiliates of COYOTE, were set up in the following years in another twenty US cities.

These initial organisations have argued that women have the right to determine how they will use their own bodies, most of the problems associated with prostitution (and sex work) relate

to its prohibition and stigmatisation, women are not driven into prostitution and sex work merely because of economic pressures for some freely choose prostitution and that prostitution will not end after capitalism. Other organisations also developed. The US Prostitutes' Collective (established 1980) and the English Collective of Prostitutes (established 1975) emerged from, and were influenced by, the International Wages for Housework Campaign, which was set up in 1972. They are part of the International Prostitutes' Collective, which has affiliates in Canada, Trinidad and Tobago. These organisations see prostitution in class-based terms of the poor and oppressed against the rich and oppressors. On the one hand, poverty and exploitation force women into prostitution and on the other women need human, legal, economic and civil rights so that they are not forced into prostitution. This is seen as part of the struggle of the women's and working class movements. However, they are abolitionists and see decriminalisation as an interim step.

But all these organisations and others that followed experienced deep-seated and extensive problems after initial bursts of enthusiasm and effort in terms of achieving radical law reform, public toleration, de-stigmatisation and material improvements in conditions of work. The source of these problems revolved around lack of resources and marginalisation in society. Firstly, these prostitutes' rights groups did not operate as membership-based organisations of prostitutes, which would levy subscriptions, create democratic structures, use participative processes of forming policies and deploy elected positions. Instead, they came to depend on a small milieu of self-selected charismatic leaders and non-prostitute supporters. Secondly, they experienced an inability to construct alliances with other groups such as feminists and trade unionists. Thirdly, they then faced a counter-offensive following the ascendancy of the moral majority after the rise of HIV/AIDS that scapegoated prostitutes as problems of health and morality. This compelled these groups into concentrating their work on health (of prostitutes) and education (of public stereotyping) issues and away from civil and human rights following this. Of course, these problems were not wholly of the prostitutes' rights groups but that was immaterial.

The relative failure of the prostitutes' rights groups as well as the spread of the sex work discourse by sex workers who represent forces outside of prostitution created a situation where the notion of trade unionism had a purchase amongst some sex workers. Thus, the transition from focussing on civil and political rights to economic and worker rights and from embodying pressure group activity to then organise in a union manner constitute two critical developments. Many sex workers have taken inspiration from the self-organisation of prostitutes' rights groups and come to the conclusion that they did not go far enough. This has five elements: a shift from self-help in society to self-activity, an increasing focus on changing working environments rather than influencing opinion leaders, a recognition of the inadequacy of civil and human rights on their own to gain objectives, an increasing focus on deploying collective leverage in the workplace and a broad increase in

the activities which can be described as trade union actions. The stimuli for this resulted from grievances at work and the refusal of owners and employers to adequately address these. While different sex trades have specific grievances, there are two main ones. The first is that many are not deemed by law to be employed. Instead, they are categorised as 'independent contractors', i.e. self-employed. Consequently, they have no job security, no guarantee of earnings, no health care provision, employment insurance and so on. The second is that despite being deemed as 'independent contractors', they are subject to controls over their employment like work patterns, pace of work and content of work.

The following survey of sex worker unionisation is inclusive of the main developments without being exhaustive. It comprises a small but significant development: small in an embryonic manner given size of the sex industry but significant that it may represent the beginning of a bigger trend. Starting in Britain, two lap-dancing clubs are unionised and for which the GMB has union recognition agreements. There is also a unionised brothel. The GMB, after the London-based International Union of Sex Workers joined with it in 2002, is primarily targeting Spearmint Rhino and other major lap-dancing clubs for recruitment and recognition. Membership totals about 300 sex workers. In Germany, the Verdi public sector union is recruiting and organising prostitutes in Dortmund and Hamburg, where it has helped set up a works council in one brothel. A proposed collective contract devised by Verdi was rejected by the 100 membership as a result of fear of loss of anonymity and flexibility. In the Netherlands, the long-standing Red Thread prostitutes' rights group has become part of the FNV union confederation, with the FNV now helping organise and represent prostitutes. Membership rose to around 100 before a financial crisis, as a result of government funding for the Red Thread being withdrawn, put the union organisation into jeopardy.

In the US, after a long struggle the Lusty Lady peepshow in San Francisco, the dancers unionised and gained union recognition in 1996. Following closure by the employer, the dancers and other staff bought the club, turning it into a workers' cooperative in 2003. Between 1993-1996, Pacer's in San Diego was both unionised and had union recognition. Elsewhere, dancers have unionised but failed to gain union recognition in Seattle, Anchorage, Philadelphia and Las Vegas. Porn actors and actresses in the San Fernando Valley tried to unionise in 2004 following several earlier unsuccessful attempts. In Canada, the Canadian Guild for Erotic Labour has sought to convince other unions to help it organise prostitutes and exotic dancers, while following the collapse of the Exotic Dancers' Association and before that the failure of unions for burlesque, the Strippers United Association has been formed. In Australia, two prostitutes' rights groups (Workers in the Sex Industry, Prostitutes' Collective of Victoria) joined the Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers Union in 1995.

The initial momentum has been lost as a result of meeting hostility so that recruitment is carried out through sex work

support projects rather than directly. In 2002, the Striptease Artists of Australia was formed as a union to represent lap dancers and strippers while UNITE in New Zealand organises prostitutes and striptease dancers. Less advanced developments and formations exist in South Africa, Finland, Eire, Greece, India, China, Argentina and Trinidad and Tobago, primarily for prostitutes.

Where a relatively stable union presence and union recognition have been established like the clubs like the Lusty Lady or Majingos in London and brothels in Australia and the Netherlands, significant advances have been made in winning better terms and conditions for sex workers. Examples include

unfair dismissal, minimum wages, payment for on-call hours, health and safety and ending or reducing house fees. Established unions' interest in helping unionise sex workers has resulted from trying to tackle their own membership declines, realising the de facto employment relationship of most sex workers, becoming open to the

sex work discourse, seeing that not all sex work comprises prostitution and the legal reform of the position prostitution towards a more liberal status (e.g., Australia, Germany and Netherlands). However, significant problems and weaknesses have been experienced by these embryonic sex worker union organisations. In regard of prostitution, changes in legal regulation – often the spur to unionisation – have not matched expectations and aspirations and material conditions have not changed greatly or favourably. For example, prostitutes are now obliged to pay tax and lose anonymity by being registered as prostitutes. Consequently, unionisation has been seen as being ineffective in helping to ameliorate these conditions or take advantage of the opportunities.

More generally, and ironically, the belief amongst sex workers that sex work is so rewarding (financially, socially, emotionally) and that sex workers are in control of what they do – even exploiting the clients – has been an obstacle to unionisation. This links to the view amongst sex workers that they are entrepreneurs. Of course, employer and club hostility has been marked, particularly in the US, Canada, Britain and Australia. They have engaged in strategies of suppression (sackings, victimisation, violence, favouritism) and substitution (house mothers, concessions, staff forums) to avoid and crush unionisation while deploying 'surface bargaining' to undermine collective bargaining. Many have traded on the notion: 'Who needs a union? We're small enough and friendly enough to sort of these issues between ourselves!' However, there is also competition for business, status and a lack of solidarity through notions of individualism. But any long journey begins with small steps. Trade unionism elsewhere took decades to establish itself. Over the next decade, we will be able to see whether these embryonic union organisations developed into healthy and growing children. ■

*Professor Gregor Gall is the author of the forthcoming book, Sex Worker Union Organising: An International Study (Palgrave, 2006).*

# can flatter be fairer?

**The 'flat tax' is generally seen as the political brainchild of extreme neo-liberal economics. Alex Orr attempts to argue that it is something the left in Scotland should consider.**

A tax revolution is sweeping the world, benefiting considerably the economies of nations engulfed by it. And as Scotland's economy continues to fail and poverty levels remain stubbornly high, it is a revolution those seeking a smart, successful Scotland would be well worth taking note of. The so-called 'flat tax', where one tax rate is set for all levels of income above a generous personal allowance, and in which all income is taxed once and only once, provides an advantageous alternative to the current complicated tax system. Mistakenly seen as the property of right-wing tax-cutters such as the Adam Smith Institute, a large amount of work behind the flat tax was developed by Hall and Rabushka from the Hoover Institution in 1985 and was outlined in their publication 'The Flat Tax'. They saw such a tax as achieving simplicity, economic efficiency and fairness – the traditional measures of effective taxation – while also collecting the revenues required to finance government. It is my hope to demonstrate in this article that the flat tax will benefit the poorest most, hit the richest hardest, fuel economic growth and increase revenue available to the government, a win-win situation for those on the Left and one they should be keen to progress.

The flat tax essentially works on two levels. It rolls as many taxes as possible into the single tax and the rate is set sufficiently low that compliance shoots up, saving taxpayers billions in costs and shifting activity from the black to the legitimate economy – it is less worthwhile to avoid tax by complicated tax shelters and to evade it by criminal failure to declare income. A low rate also increases the reward of extra effort and risk-taking as people can now keep a higher proportion of what they earn. The flat tax's introduction has already had remarkable economic results in many countries around the world, including Hong Kong, the Channel Islands, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Russia, Serbia, Ukraine, Slovakia and was most recently introduced in Poland.

Constantly endorsed by economists and politicians in the USA and the UK, the flat tax would clearly simplify and make the tax system more transparent, allowing for a tax return to be filled in on the back of a postcard. It would also give a much-needed boost to Scotland's economy by considerably improving incentives to work, save, invest and take entrepreneurial risks, abolishing the tax on savings, while a generous personal allowance would exempt thousands of low-earners. The flat tax would shift billions from investments that help people to avoid taxes, to those that produce goods and services, as well as attracting international business. The only losers are the accountants and tax advisers who thrive on this complicated system.

As Eastern European countries adopt the flat tax, the concept is now knocking at the door of Western governments, facing increased competition. Jersey and Hong Kong have had flat taxes since the 1940s, but it was Estonia which ten years ago first broke ranks in Eastern Europe. Its flat income tax of 26 per cent (soon to be reduced to 20 per cent) has resulted in

economic growth of six per cent a year. Lithuania and Latvia followed suit and in 2001 President Putin introduced a 13 per cent flat personal tax rate in Russia and tax revenues doubled as tax evasion was considerably reduced and economic activity increased. Germany's Council of Economic Advisors has proposed a 30 per cent flat tax on both corporate and personal income and a Finnish MEP is running for the leadership of the National Coalition Party on a flat tax platform. Spain's Socialist Government is also thinking about introducing a flat tax, and Poland's centre-left government is the most recent addition to the family, introducing a flat tax of 18 per cent covering income tax, corporation tax and VAT, sweeping away the country's complex grid of rates and exemptions by 2008. This makes Poland the ninth Eastern European country to adopt the flat tax, bringing it well and truly into the European Union mainstream. Some critics suggest that flat tax only works in smaller, less developed or transitional economies. It is true that practitioners include several of the former communist countries of Eastern Europe, as highlighted above. But Hong Kong is by no means a less developed economy, nor is Russia a small one, and Hong Kong has had a flat tax since 1948, Russia since 2001.

If introduced in Scotland, a flat tax would have positive economic and social effects, giving some much needed stimulus to the failing Scottish economy and give our nation a considerable competitive advantage in attracting high flyers and international businesses. We in Scotland are constantly faced with statistics highlighting a poor rate of economic growth, lack of international headquarters based here, a declining population, high levels of poverty bringing with it the 'sick man' of Europe tag and the highest rate of unemployment in the UK. On international evidence the likely effect of the introduction of this tax in Scotland is that revenues will soar, economic growth fuelled and living standards would rise. And while taxation is not a devolved matter, it does not mean that the flat tax should not be debated and seriously considered as a means to address our national ills.

The current British tax system operates through a complex system of allowances and bands of income. That is, each person is allowed to deduct a personal allowance from total income, which is then taxed at various 'progressive' rates ranging from 10 per cent to 40 per cent. The allowance and tax rate depend on age and status, and the system as a whole has characteristics that make it unnecessarily opaque, ineffective and administratively expensive.

Firstly, the poorest in our society are being hit hardest in tax – the average person in the UK pays 36 per cent of his or her gross income in tax, but if you are in the top fifth of income earners you pay a fraction less than this and if you are in the bottom fifth you pay a penal tax burden of nearly 40 per cent. Progressive taxation has failed to help the poor with, as highlighted, the lowest earners handing over more of their income while benefits such as the Working Tax Credit are available to people

earning £55,000 a year. Secondly, there is a separate National Insurance system, although there is little economic rationale for having separate systems. Thirdly, dividends, capital gains, and interest earnings are taxed twice, once at the corporate level and then again at the shareholder or investor level, a situation that discourages investment and saving. And fourthly, the multitude of allowances and tax bands (last year saw 400 pages of new tax law) increases the cost of running and auditing the labyrinthine tax system, while increasing incentives for taxpayers to find loopholes that minimise their taxable income. The cost of recycling this money to millions is immense. In addition, the current progressive tax system is perverse, raising a barrier against working extra hours, reinvesting or saving and diverts energy and resources into uneconomic behaviour, costing the economy billions of pounds in lost economic growth. A moderately low flat tax rate would sweep away this system, increase tax revenues, give a greater incentive to work and invest and boost the whole economy.

For a practical analysis of how a flat tax might operate in Scotland, consider a 20 per cent flat rate that might replace the current three-bracket fiscal system with rates of 10 per cent, 22 per cent and 40 per cent. The flat tax would eliminate more than 30 forms of relief, exemption and expenditure allowable under the present system. However, the system would allow, say, a £5000 personal allowance transferable between husband and wife, in case one of the spouses earns less than £5000. This tax cut would expand economic activity and increase compliance, thus broadening the tax base and increasing sources of revenue available to the government. It also, paradoxically, increases the proportion of revenue paid by highest-income individuals, putting pay to the frequently made allegation that such a reform would mainly favour the rich by lowering their high marginal

rates and by granting them improved incentives to expand their businesses. It would therefore be of some merit to explore the impact of a flat tax on individuals from different income classes. Firstly, the flat tax would have no direct impact upon the 35 per cent of adults who currently pay no taxes at all. Secondly, if we assume a £5000 personal allowance, this would exempt another estimated 15 per cent of people from paying any tax, meaning that under the flat tax half of the taxable population pay no taxes at all. Thirdly, the three-quarters of taxpayers who currently pay the basic rate of 22 per cent might pay more or less, depending on the extent to which they now take advantage of tax shelters for pension contributions and mortgage interest payments from the current system. Fourthly, the estimated 11 per cent of taxpayers who pay the high rate of 40 per cent would indeed pay a lower effective tax rate but would soon contribute a larger share of the total government revenue. Something of this effect was seen following the UK's tax cuts of the 1980s where the top 10 per cent of earners who had contributed 32 per cent of income tax before the cuts, were contributing 45 per cent afterwards.

The time is long overdue for a radical simplification of our tax system, based on a single clear rate from which low earners are exempt. A flat tax would rapidly raise more revenues from a low rate, lift thousands from the low-earner tax trap and set free the entrepreneurial energy needed to create jobs and wealth. It is a policy the Left should eagerly adopt, and while taxation is reserved to Westminster, it does not mean that the issue should not be debated north of the border – let the debate begin in earnest. ■

*Alex Orr is a member of the Scottish Institute for New Economics think-tank looking at innovative solutions to challenges facing Scotland*



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

ASLEF, 9 Arkwright Road, Hampstead, LONDON NW3 6AB.

# reviews

## British Government in Crisis or The Third English Revolution

Sir Christopher Foster, Hart Publishing, 2005, £19.95.

"No one rises so high as he knows not whither he is going."  
Oliver Cromwell

As young Euan Blair jets westward to be nursed upon the selfsame Hill as his pre-Iraq father, not to mention our Attorney-General, the Bristol flats lovingly purchased by his subsequently lachrymose mother had until recently been rented by the Thales Corporation currently mired in a South African arms scandal. Not to change the habits of a lifetime, father, in thrall to a pop star, goes global on MTV on the salvation of Africa while Zimbabwe asylum seekers are temporarily stalled on the runway. If cupidity and narcissism were satiable desires, we would surely be at endgame with a family that Middle-England, in its **volk**-wisdom, used to believe mirrored its very virtues. Riddled with personal and political leaks, even if Caplin is not Rasputin, the Blair project is sinking. If still above the surface when he departs, the tsunami of cash-induced gossip will surely send it to the bottom. The problem is how much of the Labour Party will go down with it, with the great Scottish Helmsman powerlessly but deservedly lashed to the binnacle. Even worse, given the multitude of its appalling complicities with Blair's premiership, how much of the Party deserves to survive the shipwreck?

The present situation is charged with a manic, caricatural energy, which is the reverse side of bleak despair at the arguably terminal damage Blairism has done to a thoughtful and compassionate social democratic politics. Anyone who thinks this is a gross exaggeration should read Sir Christopher Foster's analysis of the malfunctioning and malpractising Blair government. Written after a distinguished civil service and academic career, it is all the more damning because of its sober but intimately detailed account.

According to Foster, Blair on entering office, found the normal functions of government, especially the integrity of Cabinet government and the Civil Service, traumatised by its collision with Thatcherism to a degree that Major's attempts to rescue it from intensive care had been wholly unsuccessful. Blair, bringing in his own coterie (Powell, Mandelson, Campbell) immediately set up a pseudo-presidential office. Brown was no democratic counterweight to any of this. The result of his equally self-obsessed personality was the creation of an alternative centre so that British government became a form of bipolar disorder with the other relatively inconsequential Cabinet ministers pulled towards one or other of the two contending power sources. To confuse confusion

further, it became difficult to distinguish actual government from virtual news management. Thus Foster writes about the dire consequences of the triumphant election victory and its compromises with the right-wing press:

The greatest previous personal experience of most around Blair was in the media. Used to the loose but competitive management techniques of television, ministers, including the Prime Minister, were like presenters. Their media handlers and other advisers were like directors and producers. Heavily influenced in every respect by American, and particularly by Clinton's, campaigning, Blair's team built up the strongest camaraderie and trust between each other, more important to them for electioneering than comradeship and trust between would-be ministers.

These attitudes, and ways of relating to each other, persisted after the election. Their intention was to fight a permanent re-election campaign. Not until the Hutton and Butler Inquiries did the public get a glimpse of how central 24 hour a day news management was to everything they did. Moreover the collegiate feeling, which wise Prime Ministers had encouraged in Cabinet, now belonged to the aides around Blair, while Cabinet became a briefing group. Alastair Campbell got the authority and resources to centralise news management.

Ministers were evaluated on the basis of the quality of their sound bites not their departmental decision making on the rare occasions they were allowed such freedom. Minute taking, essential to establishing the causes, integrity and responsibility for decision making, was abandoned in favour of the politically promiscuous verbiage of the Number 10 sofa.

Without the checks and balances such minutes provide against the misuse of executive power, not only is there no ready check on the encroachment of such power, but blame can be shifted without limit. Brown was similar. He stopped his private office listening into his telephone calls and taking notes. Said keen to avoid blame for decisions he had taken, he avoided paper trails.

This from a government obsessed with imposing detailed professional accounting on everyone else. With Blair simultaneously frenetically impulsive but ideologically rigid to his modernisation (privatisation) project, most manifest in grotesquely expensive never-completed civil and military IT programmes, and Brown obsessed with abstract economic models often impossible

to practically implement, traditional rational, numerate methods of decision making collapsed. Thus Foster writes:

A rational policy decision requires the further factual exercises of identifying the gainers and losers from a

**A trained lawyer, Blair seems to have no respect for the law. Nor any understanding that politically motivated meddling with the law is a sure symptom of the body politic rotten from the head down**



change, giving some attention to enumeration of the benefits and costs to each – if at all important, and certainly in this case, doing it numerically – and in many cases considering the distribution of those costs and benefits through the community. The necessary normative or political weighing of the pros and cons of the options under review could frequently be done qualitatively, as long as consistent with their presentation in Cabinet papers under the British system.

While the economic, social and perhaps legal costs of the Blair whirlwind are not yet fully with us, Foster is particularly compelling on the shambles of rail policy. However, Iraq is of another order in exposing Blair's decision making. The Cabinet's permissiveness over Iraq was a totally different matter from indulging their electoral victor with the Dome. The real prelude to Iraq's bloody illegitimacy was Cabinet silence over the complete injustice done to the RAF crew in the Kintyre crash. A trained lawyer, Blair seems to have no respect for the law. Nor any understanding that politically motivated meddling with the law is a sure symptom of the body politic rotten from the head down. Foster's factual, low-key account of how the war 'cabinet' was put together makes chilling reading. Incredibly, at the heart of British war policy was the utterly misnamed Iraq Communications Group chaired by Alastair Campbell, now fresh from his New Zealand battlefield triumphs.

If Clinton presented dangers to West-Winging Blair, the Bush gang should surely have been his nemesis. He has been partly saved from the full consequences of Iraq by the embedded inertia of the British media so that the psychotic horrors of Fallujah and the smashing up of the Iraq infrastructure has been largely disguised. Also we do not count the Iraqi dead. Rather than Rumsfeld's technological fantasies, war in Iraq has become the extreme expression of corporate privatisation. American corporations, especially Cheney's Haliburton, have done away with billions of dollars (see Ed Harriman's: **On the Take in Iraq**, 7 July 2005 in **The London Review of Books**.) Worse, Iraq as predicted, has become a magnet for Islamic extremists and a fecund incubation centre for exportable terrorism. Well before 7 July, it was perfectly obvious that the only light in this dark tunnel was that of an oncoming train.

Future generations will see this political insanity that Blair got us into a neo-Conservative American war which has activated a far greater potential for internal terrorism than the 600-strong IRA ever posed. Blair was, in fact, clearly warned post-9/11 of this danger and that one per cent of British Muslims becoming active extremists entailed 16,000 men. This is the most extreme symptom of the diseased state of the relationship of the Blair government to the Civil Service. Again following in Thatcher's wake, he has largely dismissed the Civil Service as a source of knowledge, objectivity and balance. Foster's account of the relationship of government ministers to the traditional necessary function of civil servants is one of almost complete breakdown. Nature, abhorring a vacuum, has filled it with special advisers. These last days see John Birt and McKinsey Brothers tall in the saddle. At the time of writing, Foster thought that Iraq had done Blair such damage as to render him redundant. Certainly, the pre-election figure cringing in the shadow of his Scottish minder seemed on the way out. Post-election, however, he has become, incredibly,

globally centre stage surfing the populist waves of Africa and the environment and posturing as the leader of a resurrected Europe. All this despite the fact that his blind faith in corporate capitalism, American in source and method, is the antithesis of what these causes desire and need. If we can afford them, it is Haliburton which will build the new supercarriers and nuclear submarine delivery systems. He will then depart to the rich rewards of the neo-Con rubber-chicken circuit where his banal, verbose prose will be declared Churchillian. Nothing in Foster's book suggests that the labyrinthine Brown will be the agent of the resurrection of our broken and abandoned civic forms. As for the body of New Labour, what was that story about the Gadarene Swine? ■

*Andrew Noble*

## Hope in the Dark: The untold history of people power

Rebecca Solnit, Canongate Books, 2005, £7.99

'**H**ope calls for action; action is impossible without hope'. This is Solnit's basic message to activists around the world. We cannot begin to attempt to change society without hope in our hearts and minds – hope that change is possible rather than probable or guaranteed. Thus, hope is an essential part of our social imagination – our ability to imagine a different type of society.

Solnit argues that, in order to sustain our hope for changing the world, we recognise the long-term, uneven and heterogeneous nature of the process of social change. This means recognising that progressive social change can take decades, that everything begins with the first small steps, protests movements necessarily rise and fall, and that we cannot always foresee the impact of our actions.

Sometimes, our efforts end up producing new 'common sense' understandings that we forget we had to struggle and win. Indeed, we would need to have sixth senses to fully appreciate what 'our' rulers did and did not do because they cloak their actions in ways which always downplay and obscure the importance of our actions and protests.

She asks us to take heart by contrasting the reactionary economic and military domination of the world by the US with the many progressive social transformations taking place in the countries of South America. Solnit also asks us to recognise that small victories build our confidence. All this means that hope is not a blind faith. Rather, it is built on evidence.

So far, so good. But then Solnit argues the act of struggle is often enough in itself to change people and is an end in itself. In doing so, she overly celebrates resistance in itself, and reinforces the notion that people can fight politically by choosing certain lifestyles, without turning their attention to the world outside them.

## Hope is an essential part of our social imagination

Although needing a sense of patience and perspective like Solnit, socialists strive for much more than Solnit does. The changes social struggles have achieved are not enough and are reversible. Socialists cannot rely on hope alone, or as much as Solnit does. Socialists need to deploy ideology, analysis, collective organisation and mass action to achieve significant reforms and deep-seated revolution. Socialism is not perfection but it does strive to be much more a capitalism with the rough edges knocked off. ■

*Gregor Gall*

## **Saving the World and Being Happy (The Computer Ager)**

**R. Eric Swanepoel, £14.99 - ISBN: 1-4137-1756-X (available for £11.99 from [www.Word-Power.co.uk](http://www.Word-Power.co.uk))**

I'm sure we've all wondered at times just how effective our political activism actually is. Leaflets end up in the bin or go unread, political speeches of relevance are often never heard and publications like SLR don't reach a wide enough audience. Often it seems like we're never reaching the mainstream media at all. Okay, it's biased as hell but is that an excuse? The question begs itself: is a film by Ken Loach or a song by a band like The Proclaimers actually a lot more effective than half a million leaflets? At this point we probably all think 'if only I could do some novel that could bring radical politics to the masses'. Well it's too late to be first, because R. Eric Swanepoel has done it with this one.

Swanepoel's first (published) novel is the biographical tale of Nathaniel Papulous whose idealistic 'Hopeist' movement eventually revolutionises the planet. The book begins with a nicely realised take on adolescent angst and unrequited love. Nathaniel's obsession with his childhood next-door neighbour, Rosemary, transforms his whole life. His attempt to create a generated image of her leads him towards an interest in computers, mathematics and eventually to doing a PhD in the study of ageing. These studies lead him to the conclusion that ageing is mostly caused by poverty, a revelation which will later substantially shape his life. Initially however, he is persuaded to cover up his findings and he begins a lucrative life of affluence. This is interrupted by a horrific car-crash, which ironically leads to him finally winning the heart of his beloved Rosemary. Our star-crossed lovers are united only to be swiftly divided by a frightening kidnapping. This crisis forces Nathaniel to re-evaluate his life and he resolves with a small group of college friends to try and change the planet.

The book is a comedy, a romance and a savage indictment of the iniquities of global capitalism. Swanepoel has managed to combine a funny and readable novel with a highly researched analysis of global economics. His characters are astutely

drawn and realistically motivated in an ingenious narrative. His political activist's dream manifesto comes to fruition in the final chapters and it is an inspiring, sensible and realisable prospect. All in all, the novel is an entertaining and educational work which deserves a wide audience. Send it to your friend who you've been trying to get to go to a meeting for years and see if it makes a difference! ■

*Joe Middleton*

## **Agenda for a New Scotland: Visions of Scotland 2020**

**Kenny MacAskill (editor), Luath, Edinburgh, £9.99**

Coming from different political parties and none, and emanating from various walks of professional life in Scotland, the twenty eight contributors to this volume all agree there are significant serious problems in the social fabric of Scottish society. Almost to a man and woman, the contributors have supported, if not campaigned, for a devolved settlement but they now seem genuinely flummoxed by the reality that we now have it. This implicitly comprises asking: 'What do we do with it now?' and 'Why has it turned out so poorly?' and indicates a poverty and sparseness of prior vision and ideas.

Explicitly, MacAskill has brought these contributors together to try to lay out a 'Caledonian consensus' for Scotland. His vision is of creating a historical turning point where Scotland reaches a point of lift-off towards a more vibrant economy and civil society. He believes this can be done as a result of forging a new alliance between different social groups in order to create a social pact or accord, and cites Eire and Finland as exemplars of this process. Although some may dislike both, Finland is presumably more palatable than Eire on the measure of social justice alone.

Just about all areas and themes of life in Scotland are covered by this volume. Many of the contributors have a few interesting things to say but none identify the agents of social change that are capable of achieving, and that might want to achieve, these wish lists. We are left no wiser as to the role that communities, trade unions, tenants' groups and the like may have here. But, presumably very little given that there are not mentioned. In turn, we can presume by default that the chattering and professional classes as enlightened people are the chosen praetorian guard for this new consensus. Some like Henry McLeish avoid big questions like how one can achieve social democratic goals within a framework of Blairism and neo-liberalism. But others like Carol Craig reveal how the strategy of talking 'ourselves' up has now become the intellectualised balderdash of middle class reformism (and received funding from the Scottish Executive to boot). ■

*Gregor Gall*

# web review

Henry McCubbin

By the time you have read this we will have solved the problems the African Continent and, given six months, we will have solved the problems of the European Continent. Why should we be so blessed with such leadership?

Whilst all this has been going on an organisation called the 'World Tribunal on Iraq' will have had its culminating session in Istanbul. Consistent with the tradition of the 1967 Russell Tribunal on the Vietnam War, the World Tribunal on Iraq (WTI) is a worldwide undertaking to reclaim justice. It aims to record the severe wrongs, crimes and violations that were committed in the process leading up to the aggression against Iraq, during the war and throughout the ensuing occupation, that continue to be widespread to this day. It is their intention to also record the social, political, environmental and cultural devastation. In the end, the evidence gathered and presented is to serve as a historical record that breaks the web of lies promulgated by the war coalition and its embedded press.

Interested? Then try [www.worldtribunal.org](http://www.worldtribunal.org)

Evidence of intent provided to the tribunal came from a range of sources which will be of interest to readers of the Scottish Left Review. For instance, US plans to illegally put nuclear weapons in space can be found at [www.space4peace.org](http://www.space4peace.org).

The war on terror has produced a whole series of setbacks for human rights, although real terrorists, we are told, have done nothing but thrive since the occupation of Iraq. Civil liberties have not been so fortunate. This problem will be one of the themes of the next meeting of the Bertrand Russell Network for Peace and Human Rights, in Brussels on October 20 and 21 2005. More information can be found at [www.russfound.org](http://www.russfound.org) and [www.statewatch.org](http://www.statewatch.org).

Of course the silence of the British press is deafening on the revelations that are causing the plunge in President Bush's popularity they can be found at [www.afterdowningstreet.org](http://www.afterdowningstreet.org). Yes, the Americans are talking about using the diplomatic memos, in which Blair's complicity in the crime is evident, to impeach Bush!

For information and opinion on the failure of the participants in the Non Proliferation Treaty to agree please see [www.forumsocialmundial.org.br](http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br). The campaign for the removal of American nuclear weapons from Europe can be found at [www.abolition2000europe.org](http://www.abolition2000europe.org). The overall campaign against new nuclear weapons in the context of the failure of the Review Conference of the Non Proliferation Treaty is at [www.acronym.org](http://www.acronym.org).



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## no idea

control, liberation and the social imagination

**“The free market project has been as much about the contraction of hope as about the expansion of the economy. They didn’t want to defeat the Labour movement, they wanted to defeat the belief that there could be a Labour movement.”**

Almost every change in the history of mankind has come from an idea or vision which was shared by a small group of people which grew bigger. This is the social imagination. Almost every one of those ideas was opposed and resisted and almost every one of those people was persecuted or marginalised. This is the control of the social imagination.

While we no longer burn our heretics, they are now caught up in a complex and powerful web of control which discredits and silences them. A sense of resignation – or even hopelessness – is encouraged in order to suppress new ideas at source. The result is that we live in a grossly unequal society in a grossly unequal world and yet we have no widely-shared persuasive ideas about how things should be changed for the better.

**No Idea** argues that if we can understand the ways in which the social imagination is controlled, we can recapture it. If we can recapture it, ideas will come and change will happen.

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