



Plus:

America democracy,
the crisis in social work
and a liberal agenda
for the Parliament

The Social Inclusion Industry Who is seeing the benefit?

scottishleftreview

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A journal of the left in Scotland brought about since the formation of the Scottish Parliament in July 1999

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Cover Illustration: Tommy Perman,
tommyperman@surfacepressure.co.uk www.surfacepressure.co.uk

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Articles for publication should be emailed to: editorial@scottishleftreview.org

Letters and comments should be emailed to: feedback@scottishleftreview.org

Website: www.scottishleftreview.org Tel/Fax 0141 424 0042

Scottish Left Review, 741 Shields Road, Pollokshields, Glasgow G41 4PL

comment

The CBI (obviously) Labour Government committee regular Alice Brown (less obviously) have recently claimed that if the Scottish Parliament spent less time on social problems and more time on the economy we would have a better chance of generating the prosperity that would alleviate the social problems. The fact that it is demonstrable that economic prosperity without redistributive measures almost never reduce these social problems is a big flaw in the argument, but given that most of the powers required either to stimulate the economy or to redistribute its outputs lie with Westminster, let's concentrate on another problem. The Alice Brown/CBI approach seems to imply that the Scottish Parliament is actually doing something significant to address social problems. In actual fact, the Parliament seems to have lost all interest in social justice. John McAllion's article in this issue demonstrates the extent to which social justice disappeared from the agenda over the course of the last four years and with no new ideas in the election campaign that doesn't look like changing. Jack McConnell would disagree. Firstly he would tell us how much is already being done and would reel off the amount spent on social inclusion initiatives (in particular the Social Inclusion Partnerships) and the targets set by the Executive. Secondly he would point out the vigorous anti-crime agenda he is setting forth and berate the 'establishment' for not realising that this is precisely what is blighting the life of those who are socially excluded. This, he would say, is the real social inclusion agenda.

Which quite neatly sums up everything which is wrong with the social inclusion agenda in Scotland; that it doesn't mean anything and that it doesn't make any difference. Let's take Jack's defences in reverse order. He would tell you that social inclusion is about a complex array of factors and it is how they interact that is the key to understanding both its cause and its effects. This is part of the standard New Labour instruction manual. Social inclusion was not a phrase many people would be aware of prior to 1997. It emerged from academic writing and in this context actually meant something. It is entirely correct to say that the causes of social problems are complex. Poverty is a key factor, but so are infrastructure, crime, attitudes and family relations, among other things. The academic theories of social inclusion attempt to try to understand how these things prove to be mutually reinforcing. So something which people might assume not to be a problem for someone who is 'excluded' on the basis of unemployment - free time - actually **is** a problem when there is no childcare available, when the bureaucracy of state benefits has to be grappled with, when transport links are poor and local infrastructure (such as affordable

food shops] is insufficient and when demotivation takes its toll. Social exclusions theory explains time-poverty as the result of an interaction of factors. But what an academic takes as read - that almost all of these complicating factors themselves stem from the root problem of poverty - disappears in the political sleight-of-hand which is big-S Social, big-I Inclusion. Rather than an attempt to explain something it becomes an attempt to divert people from the real problem. You will almost all have come across the phrase 'but it's about more than income' followed by any convenient alternative cause. And this will preferably be one that doesn't involve messing with the interests of big business. Such as, oh, crime, say. And that is how we get the amazing pirouette through which 'tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime' (i.e. we will tackle crime, but we also have to tackle the poverty which causes much of it) becomes 'we owe it to the socially excluded to address crime, the scourge of their lives' (i.e. we will tackle poverty by tackling crime).

The social inclusion agenda was a trick. It was a trick played by a New Labour leadership on its own party. Labour supporters wanted a change from 18 years of free-market-and-fuck-the-poor Tory leadership but Blair had already decided to run a very similar pro-business, free-market-and-everything-else-is-secondary administration. So while he couldn't actually **deliver** change, he had to appear to offer it. So we have social inclusion, an agenda which is about anything you want it to be so long as it isn't poverty. Social inclusion is about taking the failures resulting from poverty, packaging them up and passing them off to whoever can be made to take the blame. So the fact that since New Labour came to power the gap between the rich and the poor has widened is to be given no credence in, for example, the problems of educational under achievement. Rather, the fault must lie with failing schools, second-rate teachers, elitist universities and criminal elements among pupils. And here is the true glory of social inclusion; by restricting the debate to such nonsensical terms (who is to blame for each and every failure resulting from poverty) Blair can somehow turn the solution into a giant bung for the very free-market corporations which are at the heart of the problem in the first place. Inclusion is about failing schools; modernisation (which now always seems to result in contracts for private companies one way or another) is the solution. Stop and follow this logic for a moment. The Cheap Healthcare Corporation buys the franchise to provide all the auxiliary services for a hospital. It then pays off a third of its staff and cuts the wages of the rest. Locally poverty gets worse as a result of this. The poverty

leads to a deterioration in the health of the community. So the hospital is seen to fail. So the Cheap Healthcare Corporation gets to run the clinical services too.

Social inclusion is so damn popular with New Labour because it doesn't mean anything; and because it doesn't make much difference. The responses to the survey of people living in the Blantyre Social Inclusion Partnership area (see Margaret Carson's article on page 7) are revealing;. One respondent identified the impact of 'reverse redistribution' (diverting resources for poverty into the pockets of the middle-classes); "Your social inclusion is that somebody sits down in a local

office and decides. Social inclusion - that's a great term and we'll use that to gie all oursel's a lot of money to sit on that panel and we've then spent fifty thousand on social inclusion, and that amounts to the wages they have been paid, and not a ha'penny has come out into the community and that's the bottom line of it." The problems of poverty will not be addressed through project funding which results in most of the money going into salaries which will be spent in the middle class suburbs. This is not to decry the many idealistic and committed people who work on these projects, nor to decry the valuable work that they do. It is just to state the obvious; that if the root cause of the problem is not addressed then all this remedial work will make no permanent, long-term difference. The best community worker in the world cannot bring the jobs back to Blantyre that Thatcher's free-market reforms destroyed, and it is time for Jack McConnell to stop pretending that they

can. The unemployment, the low pay and the third-world infrastructure are the things that have to go first and then the graffiti will follow. It will not work the other way round.

So what is to be done? We have asked six writers to consider the failures of the current approach to social inclusion/social justice/poverty in Scotland - the Social Inclusion Industry - and their contributions are revealing. Perhaps we are remiss in not asking for more emphasis on what we **should** be doing, and this is something the Scottish Left Review must return to. Some of the solutions might be found in rediscovering the power of intervention and job creation, some in using what powers we have to redistribute wealth more effectively (local government taxation might be a start) and some in proper investment in the infrastructure of these communities (particularly housing, transport and recreation). In the meantime, we are left with a bunch of initiatives which no-one really understands. One of the Blantyre respondents says that she calls these quangos, projects and initiatives 'Conundrums' - puzzling riddles. This is a start; at least one person in Scotland understands the problem. ■

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forty years, nothing learned

Looking at forty years of poverty programmes, Henry McCubbin concludes that little has changed

Identify a social problem, study those affected, discover in what ways they are different from the rest of us as a consequence of deprivation and injustice then define the differences as the cause of the social problem itself. So Ryan, an American sociologist put in **Blaming the Victim**. A generation on from America's 'War on Poverty' programme, New Labour is importing these American ideas to attack 'social exclusion' using the same discredited arguments - that the poor and not the wider economic and social structures are in need of reform. A further title, which has a resonance today, is that of Daniel Bell's **The End of Ideology** America had a young President in Kennedy, old politics were out and new modernising politics was the ideal vehicle to embrace new solutions. The dangerous assumption being that modernisation comes value free.

It is with great irony that the many-times-discredited Peter Mandelson was chosen to make the 'most important announcement of the New Labour administration' when he proclaimed that the Prime Minister would be setting up a Social Exclusion Unit. The plusses were to be a series of technical solutions, higher skills, higher standards in schools and colleges, an attack on truancy, partnership with business and an 'imaginative' welfare to work programme to put the long term unemployed back to work. All of this begs the questions as to how the poor got there in the first place when they are surrounded by such wealth and if all of these technical measures, already tried in the sixties, are put in place will the relentless logic of the capitalist system not provide the same outcomes?

It is remarkable how similar the vocabularies of the sixties and of New Labour are. Kennedy's economic advisor believed "that the poor did not need handouts so much as enrichment programmes to render them more employable" - recognisable as the sound-bite that the poor need a hand up not handouts. Once again poverty is being located in the individual and in the collective characteristics of the poor such that "we must concentrate our efforts on helping individuals who can escape their situation to do so". What is observed, as a culture of poverty and the creation of an underclass, is no less than the adaptation and reaction of the poor to their marginalised position in capitalist society. The point about revisiting a time prior to Blair's appearance is to illustrate that the problems, which had to be tackled then, are the same as today's. One would have thought that all these attacks on the visible attributes of poverty would have had

some effect today, but this is not the case. The one factor, which has remained independent, has been the social and economic ordering of the distribution of wealth. Changes made to the tax and benefits system during the Tory years provide empirical evidence that transferring wealth to the rich impoverishes the poor. This maldistribution has been aggravated under New Labour with a recent thirty percent cut in capital gains tax accompanied by a cut in the benefits to poor.

American 'War on Poverty' efforts started with their Economic Opportunity Bill and the establishment of the Office of Economic Opportunity. Once again the language of opportunity is strongly represented in the ideological parlance of 30 years ago. The US War on Poverty sought to equip the poor to compete more effectively in the market. Therefore the elimination of poverty not only required an increase in transfer payments but also programmes to equip the poor to take advantage of new opportunities. The measures adopted then and being promoted today as 'new' thinking were none other than job training, work experience and community organisation. At that time, according to the University of Michigan, poverty could be abolished. Raising every family in the nation above subsistence level would have cost about \$10 billion a year. That was less than two per cent of GNP and less than 10 per cent of tax revenues. Redistribution of this magnitude did not occur, but the fact that the thought was even considered and quantified indicates that more radical thinking was being published then than today. Also introduced at Federal level was the Community Action Programme (CAP). Over diversity and rigidity of administration of the existing programmes were identified as rendering ineffective much of what was already being attempted. CAPs were introduced to involve the poor in the redesign of existing programmes and in designing the new ones. One consequence encouraged was that it ran headfirst into the professionals who ran existing schemes. Another, which was unforeseen, mobilised and simultaneously raised expectation amongst the poor. In fact, so effective was this strategy that the US Conference of Mayors accused the Office of Equal Opportunity of "fostering class struggle". Radical reviewers of the programme saw that "The distribution of income is determined primarily by the distribution of political power - those with the most power get the most. ... Therefore the best anti-poverty strategy is to encourage the development of organisations of the poor that will fight for their desired ends." This led to a situation

where the political organisation of the poor was directed against agencies dealing with alleviating poverty and not necessarily against the structural arrangements within society which had created their poverty in the first place.

The out turn of the War on Poverty programme was mildly positive. Some of those completing training had some slight gain. Even in a political system that actively opposed socialism, transfer payments did increase. But despite this the nation's money income distribution had not become more equal. Suffice to say that in later years inequality has on several occasions been able to create sufficient social friction to ignite riots and looting. If those in authority see an absolute measure of poverty as adequate, those subjected to their policies would appear to beg to differ. In May 1968 Harold Wilson announced the British response to urban poverty on the steps of Birmingham Town Hall. When Wilson referred to abundant transatlantic analogies he was referring to the race riots in Watts and Newark and was looking over his shoulder at Enoch Powell and his infamous 'rivers of blood' speech. It should come as no surprise that there was in fact no Urban Programme as announced that day and in fact then-Labour Minister Richard Crossman mentioned in his diary that they had difficulty "to make any practical sense of the idea". A civil service committee was set up to develop this idea but no new resources were to be made available. The programme was altered from one skewed towards the ethnic minorities to one aimed at deprived urban areas. Initially the Government sanctioned the minimal sum of £20 million spread over four years. Hardly leaving Old Labour open to Blair's charge of "indiscriminate tax and spend". Certainly one could point to the increase in Government expenditure on social services rising from around 16 per cent of GNP in 1951 to 24 per cent in 1971. Most of the increase took place during the "thirteen wasted years of Tory misrule". This level of expenditure was entirely in keeping with other countries also developing post war social welfare systems

The Community Development Programmes, which were set up within the Urban Programme, followed a familiar path. Small experimental programmes could be used to flag the recognition of a problem. Twelve projects were set up in predefined deprived areas each with an action team and a research team. The population sought in the CDP areas was that which, through ill-fortune or personal inadequacy, suffer from a multitude of inter-related problems and deprivation, which could not be resolved

by uncoordinated support from a series of separately organised services. To Crossman the objective was to see how "a community could pull itself up by its own bootstraps". In order to ensure control of the projects, central government was to provide 75 per cent of the funds with 25 per cent provided by local government. The latter portion was to provide co-ordination of the disparate agencies already involved and to provide credibility for the projects initially through the provision of playgroups etc. However the local project activists identified employment as a key issue. They saw that the perpetuation of discrimination and disadvantage in the labour market was due to a shortage of jobs. In this there was a clear fracture between the social pathology theories of the projects originators and the reality in the CDP areas

that saw unemployment not as result of inadequacy or a lack of skills in individuals but due to the decline in employment for specific social groups.

Some CDPs saw the Government as unsympathetic to their arguments, and therefore saw the programmes as being directed at social control of those experiencing poverty. Other CDPs saw as their role the shaping of existing local and central government policies, which were premised on a liberal and pluralist view

of poverty. The majority of the projects rejected the view, as did sociologist A H Halsey when it came to assuming that the legitimate use of the existing political structures could produce the welfare society. "This assumption may," he said "of course, prove historically to have been the most interesting facet of the Educational Priority Area and Community Development Projects. It may turn out have been no more than a shibboleth of liberal society in decline." One observer at the time commented that "disastrous as the CDPs were from the point of view of Home Office control ... they did without exception demonstrate the possibility of intensifying the solidarity and effectiveness of informal neighbourhood networks through conflict." Here was a split between a Fabianist approach entailing meticulous gathering of data, engaging the political authorities in dialogue and the radical view that encouraged the mobilisation of community groups and trade unions through collective action.

The Callaghan government viewed the provision of welfare as a drag on the productive sector of society whereas Mrs Thatcher saw poverty as a necessary spur to force the poor into low paid employment. The Callaghan view was best expressed in the 1977 White Paper **Policy for**

It is remarkable how similar the vocabularies of the sixties and of New Labour are

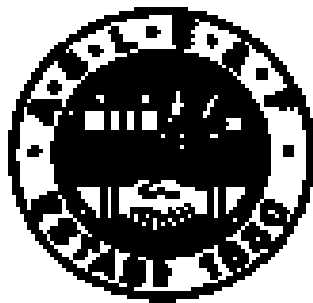
the Inner Cities. This moved from the opinion that the inhabitants of declining areas were to blame and replaced it by emphasis on environmental improvement. However this was not a response directly attributable to the CDPs as this was not the intervention they had called for. "The present economic strategy of the government, designed to speed up the reorganisation of British industry will only accelerate the decline of the older areas. With the one hand the government pours money into more 'special' policies and programmes designed to relieve the problems in these areas. With the other it introduces severe cuts in public expenditure in the name of restoring profitability and investment in manufacturing industry, doing far more damage to these places than any special polices make up for... These declining areas have little chance of being 'regenerated' again. The most relevant measures are not be found in tinkering with housing or labour markets, nor with population dispersal policies, nor the creation of special development agencies or of regional assemblies - but with measures designed to control the activities of capital." [Community Development Project Information and Intelligence Unit 1977]

The debate has not moved on much from that of the seventies. The problem as New Labour would wish to define it is one of individual, family and community inadequacy. This, they say, causes an increase in welfare spending, encourages dependency and the growth of unproductive bureaucracies and threatens the profitability

of the economy. Eureka! The unemployed are to blame for unemployment. The attractiveness of this approach is that it is cheap and it has the effect that Middle England can relieve itself of any guilt or anxiety as to whether they should shoulder any of the blame or bear the costs of correcting the wrongs done to those forced into poverty.

What conclusions can be drawn from the continuing political attraction of the social pathology of poverty in spite of the overwhelming empirical and academic evidence against? One certainly cannot conclude that programmes put into effect in response to this analysis have done anything substantial to relieve the problem. Poverty is worse now than when the right-wing Thatcher Government took office in 1979 and indications are that it is worsening under New Labour. Over this period we have been exposed to the same old reasons for this, from a decline in national morality to lack of discipline in the home and at school. What has been argued above is that the social pathology of poverty is nothing but bogus conservative propaganda more in tune with 19th Century Liberalism. When Tony Blair proclaimed that his project was to end the great ideological divide in British politics over the last century, how many thought that he would attempt do it by ideologically cleansing the socialist half? ■

Henry McCubbin is a former Labour MEP



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.

Mick Rix, General Secretary. ASLEF, 9 Arkwright Road, Hampstead, LONDON NW3 6AB.

local voices

Margaret Carson reports on some of the views of people living in a Social Inclusion Partnership area on what difference it has made to them

"...there is a lot of new words come up that the likes of us have no idea what it means....in fact any government official speaks a foreign language to us... of course they do that to blind us so we don't know what they are talking about."

(Man aged 73 in Burnbank)

"There is nothing for the youngsters to do. Thirty-five years ago there was three or four dance halls, two picture halls and a bowling alley. Now there is nothing while the population has quadrupled. There's not even a café for the kids to go to but we have five pubs and three off-sales on the main street..."

(Woman, retired in Blantyre)

"...we've tried to get them to open a youth club sort of thing where everybody just can go, so everybody can no' get into trouble - like a wee community centre - but nothing ever happened to it. The police kept saying, right we'll try and get this, and things like that but it never came about. They've nowhere to go so that is how they jump about the streets..."

(Woman, aged 17, in Burnbank)

What impact are social inclusion initiatives making on the people they are supposed to benefit? What lies behind the statistics of equality indicators and the money spent?

The Scottish Civic Forum carried out some qualitative research in an established Social Inclusion Partnership (SIP) area. The aim was not to evaluate all the work done by the SIP in the community but to explore something of the subjective impact. The approach was to record the views of a broad range of people, enabling them to speak freely and raise whatever points they wished. There were prompt questions on knowledge and experience of local SIP's projects and of the meaning of social inclusion. Although this was intended primarily as a qualitative exercise, the extremely low level of knowledge and engagement with these initiatives was so striking that it should be treated as a significant indicator. Similarly with the concept of social inclusion. The Blantyre and North Hamilton Social Inclusion Partnership was formed in April 1999. It is comparatively well-established. The research

took place in Burnbank and Blantyre. The SIPs area serves a community of 24,000. Unemployment, particularly long-term, is a major problem with 38 per cent of unemployed males registered as long-term. Twenty eight per cent of under-25s were out of work compared with 11 per cent in South Lanarkshire and deprivation levels for children were significantly higher than the South Lanarkshire average.

Efforts were made to balance those interviewed in terms of gender and age with 107 in total being interviewed. Interviews took place in the street, in the Asda shopping complex and in a number of social/recreational settings. Over 90 per cent of those interviewed could not attempt an explanation of the meaning of social inclusion and some of those few who offered an explanation clearly did not understand it. Less than five per cent expressed any knowledge of the local Partnership and several more had some knowledge or contact with specific initiatives. Much language commonly used by politicians and administrators was not understood by many of those interviewed e.g. 'projects', 'service provision'. The impression gained was that there were many who were linguistically excluded in the context of official or political language. But this is not to say that people were apathetic about what was happening in their locality. The impression gained was that political participation was perceived as an occupation remote from ordinary people.

Social Inclusion: Knowledge and Experience

The following are some of the comments from the small number of people who ventured an explanation of social inclusion and people who had some contact with SIPs initiatives.

"I was at the Braveheart last week... I was down town and I got a pen and I got a key-ring... I don't know if it's just to give somebody something to do because they are no medical, experienced people, they write wee numbers down. Just to keep themselves right they say, 'You better go to the doctor'"

"One of the girls who plays bowls with us, she's in the Credit Union."

Is this another of thae groups they've started? Conundrums as I call them...

"What they done was encourage us old ones... so they thought on a number and it's basically been oversubscribed now. Once you done twelve (health check-ups), they gave you a free pass for everything in the baths for six months..."

"...they just tell you a load of lies. I went to meetings for three and a half years trying to get a school fence and we're still waiting on it - so don't even speak to me about SIPs."

"You'll notice that they have pulled down the civic centre in Hillhouse and they were always going to build a new one. Would that come under that partnership?"

"This club is aimed more at the middle age group. We do try to encourage young people to come along on a Friday... we provide for senior citizens and for mentally and physically handicapped people... I applied to that organisation (Community Links) and do you know the reply I got back? Since actually we are licensed premises, we cannot be considered... I was told that there is a bookies over there and they got a covering for their entrance with a £10,000 grant from the same people."

"I just left sixth year there but when I was at school I did this thing for SIP and it was like a community's meeting and they were asking us questions like how to improve it and everything but I don't think anything's came of it yet."

"...we spoke about it at the Labour Party meeting at High Blantyre. I said well, I always feel better in a place that looks nicer... I really had hoped more would have been done to sort out the roads and even brighten up the town... but nothing. I don't see any visible change at High Blantyre."

"The only item that I can recall that may fall into that category (a SIPs initiative) is the Up-For-It sports programme - and let me tell you, I only heard that through someone ... who so happened had had a heart attack and as part of his recuperation programme was put on to it. So at the end of the day, you need to be ill before you know about it."

"Social inclusion? - that's all those asylums coming here and getting the handouts we cannae get."

"Your social inclusion is that somebody sits down in a local office and decides. Social inclusion - that's a great term and we'll use that to gie all ourselfs a lot of money to sit on that panel and we've then spent fifty thousand on social inclusion, and that amounts to the wages they have been paid, and not a ha'penny has come out into the community and that's the bottom line of it."

Views on Problems in the Community

There were three general themes that emerged from the respondent's comments: public order issues, lack of constructive recreation for young people, and a general cynicism about the political process.

Public Order

A significant majority of those interviewed called for an increased police presence to tackle the alleged problem of physical attacks and to address the fear felt by local residents. It was not within the scope of the research to check the validity of these allegations. However more people volunteered first-hand knowledge of attacks on themselves, members of their family or their property than had ever heard of Social Inclusion or SIPs.

"Get rid of the junkies - if they brought back time to about thirty years ago when police could spend time on the beat just with nothing to do... but they cannae possibly do now because there is too much paperwork"

"...I am only seventeen myself and I see people I used to go to school with hanging about the street, drinking and causing chaos. Just a couple of weeks there - I stay with my mum and dad and we were watching television and the back window got broken and everything and it's just not a nice place at all. I really don't like it."

"The licensed premises here don't care who they sell drink to, as far as I'm concerned. As long as they get drink sold."

"You've got two policeman in a car that patrol Blantyre, Uddingston and Bothwell - that's your policing for the whole area - aye, and they're restricted to a tenner's worth of petrol a week."

"...he (her husband) was working ... with long-term psychiatric patients and getting them out into the community. They were just coming out of hospital and they were left sitting about all day with no-one. He only stuck it for about sixteen weeks and decided to move on elsewhere."

"I'm a taxi driver and I could take you to, I'd say, at least a dozen houses in this area... that are dealing ... - if I know about it, the police must know about it."

".....they made the sale of council houses possible and what has happened is all the good council houses have been bought over - what they've left is all the dross that

They revamped Blantyre by knocking it down

Anyway, I don't care - I've got a big gun - who cares?"

naebody wants and they're turning into ghettos."

"We used to come at 11 o'clock on a Monday and it was terrible then because all the druggies were in the chemist getting their Methadone."

"...it was a good hall for people using it (the community centre) but all of a sudden they decide to close it... why do they no just demolish it - that's where the Buckfast Brigade sit round the back - if it's no there, they cannae sit round there."

Oh the changes here are pathetic, see the junkies, all they're doin' is fuckin' mugging old women. They need those two lanes (underpasses) blocked off. Anyway, I don't care - I'm back off to Catterick - I've got a big gun - who cares?"

Lack of Recreation

"There are no park facilities for the young - there used to be some in Meadow Avenue and Calderwood and play areas in the schemes but they have all been taken away. Greenhill had swings and a pitch and putt, shop and walkways but that is all gone now and it's to be made into a new crematorium."

"They did away with the football parks in Blantyre - you need a car now to get to a football pitch"

"The only thing that's missing is the tumbleweed blowing down the street - you could shoot a cowboy movie in it.."

"When we were young there was always a bit of grass you could get a game of football on. This Council has just used Blantyre and Burnbank. It is just a huge housing scheme - there's no green bits left to play on."

"There's no a local coffee shop, no an ice-cream parlour, nothing."

"They revamped Blantyre by knocking it down. Now the rents are too high and the shops are closing - there used to be a lot of shops in Springwells and the West End but now you can't even buy a can of paint or wallpaper without going into Hamilton or East Kilbride."

"Terminal One and Universal Connections are not local to Burnbank so the kids won't go"

"...there has been a breakdown in the community, there's no any focus to where the place is - this street is the focus

- the community hall has gone, everything has gone, there's nothing left."

"It's a damn shame for the kids - everybody's against them. Terminal One was a vast amount of money for the minority, not the majority. The kids need somewhere to call their own - a wooden hut or a portacabin."

Social inclusion - that's a great term and we'll use that to gie all oursel's a lot of money to sit on that panel and we've then spent fifty thousand on social inclusion, and that amounts to the wages they have been paid, and not a ha'penny has come out into the community and that's the bottom line of it.

Cynicism about Politics

(When the researcher introduced herself as coming from the Scottish Civic Forum, this first comment was the response;)

"Is this another of thae groups they've started? Conundrums as I call them..."

"The biggest fuckin' steel industry in Europe - Maggie Thatcher destroyed it with the stroke of a pen, just the stroke of a pen. I worked with the 'Craig, hen, all my days from Dalziell right up and she fuckin' destroyed it..."

"...the leader of South Lanarkshire Council and his cohorts, they put one of their puppets in to run a quango... and they use this for electioneering as you will find within the next few months."

"...You cannae blame the Council because they did them (houses) all up and it's a complete waste of time because they are no hittin' the problem properly there is drug rehabilitation, how do they get them into it? They got rid of the problem down on the front street. They just demolished three blocks of flats, just got rid of them, there's nothing there now."

"Ah've never voted in my life before. Ah'm not on the electoral roll. Ah've got my ain politics that's why I've never ever voted."

"I'm not surprised that they wouldnae go to their local councillor because I couldnae tell you who my local councillor is."

"Politicians at the moment must be the lowest of the low, but they have brought that on themselves..."

"Ah see this is the problem, they've got to vote along party lines. They are told what to vote for - if they want one thing out of the ten, he has to vote for the other nine to get it." ■

Margaret Carson is a Project Researcher who carried out the survey on behalf of the Scottish Civic Forum

whatever happened to social justice?

John McAllion argues that the Scottish Executive has ensured that poverty is not an issue MSPs will discuss

In the Scottish Parliament's early years, a persistent theme in the speeches and pronouncements of the Labour leadership was their insistence that devolution was a tool for fashioning a socially just rather than a separate Scotland. They insisted that our new Parliament would cement Scotland firmly into the Union by delivering the social justice that had always been the people's real priority north of the border. Speaking during an early parliamentary session, Donald Dewar reminded MSPs that "our aim is social justice in a prosperous Scotland." It was an idea repeated in almost every major Ministerial statement. Housing stock transfers were at the heart of the social justice agenda and would tackle poverty and housing exclusion. The central heating programme and warm deal would end pensioner fuel poverty. Concessionary travel would end the isolation and exclusion of the elderly. The national minimum wage and working families tax credits would make work worthwhile and lift thousands out of poverty.

This theme was renewed by Donald's successor Henry McLeish. In the middle of the Anniesland by-election he launched the Parliament's first Social Justice report. Flanked by three senior Ministers, he promised an £80 million onslaught on child poverty that would lift 100,000 children out of poverty. Free personal care for the elderly would later become one of the real achievements of Henry's time in office. Again, very much a socially just and universal measure that guaranteed access to care as of right rather than through the hated means test. Nor was this concern for social justice confined to the New Labour leadership. When in the same early stages, the Labour Group was asked to indicate preferences for different committees, the largest number chose Social Justice. It was the committee to be on because it would be in the forefront of the fight against poverty and for the delivery of the social justice agenda. In the end only five Labour members could be on the 11 member committee, but there were many disappointed others left outside.

The then atmosphere gripping Labour MSPs was such that almost anything seemed possible. When Donald Dewar and his Executive made clear their opposition to the abolition of poinding and warrant sales without an alternative means of seizing the goods of the poor, they suffered the major rebellion of the Parliament to date. Labour MSPs openly revolted on what they saw as an issue fundamental to the whole social justice agenda. When asked to vote for the poor or for the Executive, they overwhelmingly chose to

back the poor. Donald and Jim Wallace were forced into humiliating retreat. The Social Justice committee also began well and threw itself into the fight against poverty. There were investigations into the flagship policy of housing stock transfer and the links between drug misuse and deprived communities. The committee played a key role in evidence sessions around the abolition of poinding and warrant sales bill. It provided an essential platform for those on the receiving end of warrant sales to place on record the shame and humiliation heaped on the most vulnerable debtors by a system that belonged to the 19th rather than the 21st century.

Important links were also established with the Communities Against Poverty network. There were to be quarterly meetings between the committee and the network. Each side would take turns at identifying the issues to be addressed together. For the first time, poor people and their representatives would have a direct line into what was arguably the key committee in the Parliament. They would be setting at least part of the work agenda for the committee. Their issues would now be addressed on their terms. The committee would learn from them that you don't get to grips with fuel poverty just by improving insulation and installing central heating systems. If the household is too poor to afford the cost then heating systems don't get turned on. People get into debt, can't afford the bills and end with their heating and power disconnected by privatised power companies for whom profit is the bottom line. Fuel poverty, instead of being addressed through conferences sponsored by the power companies, was now being approached from the perspective of the fuel poor themselves. The Committee now began to understand the desperation that drove individuals to try to steal electricity at huge personal risk and cost to themselves and their families. They also began to understand that the power companies were more than prepared to cut the vulnerable off from heat and power to protect their own profits and dividends.

This reaching out to parts of Scotland as yet untouched by the political establishment was exactly what the Scottish Parliament was meant to be about. Giving a voice to the poor, empowering them to influence the political agenda, listening to their side of the narrative that is 21st century capitalist Scotland. At the time it seemed too good to be true and, tragically, it did not last. Eighteen months into the Parliament, the Executive brought forward a major restructuring of the committee system. The rationale

used was the excessive workload on the Executive parties' backbenchers due to the strains involved in ensuring an Executive majority on every committee. Committees were now being downsized to ease the burden of work on individual backbenchers. Inevitably, this involved removing Labour backbenchers from a range of committees. Despite the fact that no-one on the Social Justice committee had complained about workload or asked to be removed from the committee, it was downsized from 11 to 7 members and became one of the smallest in the Parliament. The two Labour members removed, myself and one other, were told at the time that the criteria used to select us was a combination of comparing the respective abilities, experience and records to date of Labour members on the committee. I have no evidence to prove that this was not the case, so perhaps it was just co-incidence that we were the only two Labour members to have voted against the Labour whip on key elements of its flagship policy of housing stock transfer.

By this stage, the Executive was ready to introduce its Housing Bill. As its flagship policy, this Bill would dominate the workload of the committee for the next 6 months. Indeed the workload of the committee for the rest of the Parliament now came to be dominated by Executive initiatives - the Executive inspired Mortgage Rights Bill; various draft orders and guidance issued under the new Housing Act; consultations on homelessness, fuel poverty and houses in multiple occupation; budget proposals; new bills on recovering debt by exceptional attachment orders and on homelessness; and annual Social Justice reports. Apart from inquiries into the voluntary sector and social inclusion partnerships, the committee found itself tied down by an agenda dominated by the Executive's programme. Whether by accident or design, the prospects of Social Justice developing as a thorn in the establishment's side and as a voice for the poor had dimmed. The committee would go on to shut down its pioneering relationship with the grassroots Communities Against Poverty network. In the main, it now worked with the grain of the Executive programme. It even wound down its own work programme a full month before the end of the first Parliament. It became a committee Ministers could rely upon.

From the perspective of an Executive, at one time reeling under the lash of backbench rebellion, the usual parliamentary channels had been re-established. The early defeat on poindings and warrant sales was later reversed by the introduction of exceptional attachment orders - the alternative means of seizing the goods of poor debtors the Executive had originally insisted upon. A nationwide campaign in support of the Free Schools Meals bill was defeated by a combination of loyal Executive backbenchers and Tories. Motions condemning New Labour wars in Afghanistan and Iraq were seen off by the same centre right parliamentary coalition. This, of course, reflected a change of approach ushered in

under the leadership of Jack McConnell. Jack remains the authentic voice of New Labour in Scotland. The New Labour dogma of economic stability, sound public finances, low inflation, private delivery of public services and business friendly policies found its true Scottish voice in Jack's administration. Scottish New Labour is now firmly in the capitalist camp.

Record investment in health and education will be delivered via the private sector. Targeting/means testing is back. The only salvation for hard working families continues to be working in an increasingly deregulated market place. Those who will not conform will be dealt with. In place of the early emphasis on social justice, there now is a naked populism that appeals to the reactionary instincts of respectable folk. A crackdown on crime is the new mantra. Criminals, particularly young criminals, will be taught lessons they will not forget. The undeserving poor will be dealt with through electronic tagging, parental orders, curfews, fast-track justice and more privatised prisons. This is one centre-left administration that refuses to be outflanked on its right by any other party. But, somewhere on this long march to the right, the early vision of social justice has been lost.

As 2002 drew to a close, the Rowntree Report revealed a Scotland where 1.2 million Scots lived in low income households, child poverty was still on the rise and social inequality was getting worse under what was now successive Labour administrations. Slowly and steadily a picture was emerging that revealed the bankruptcy of the idea at the heart of New Labour - the idea that a successful capitalism could deliver real social progress for all working people and their families. Those who never wavered in their view of capitalism as an inherently unstable, murderous and planet wrecking system foresaw the ultimate failure of the New Labour project. They are now being joined by increasing numbers of disillusioned trade union and political activists.

In the current Parliament there is no longer a Social Justice committee. It has been replaced by 'Communities' and given a new remit to consider and report on 9 different areas touching on issues from charity law through to building standards. Top priority among these areas is anti-social behaviour. Poverty is only fourth on the list and one suspects that there will be neither time nor inclination on the part of the Committee to consider how and why poverty has always been endemic to deregulated capitalist market systems. Until that changes, the Parliament and its committees will continue to miss the political heartbeat of these terrible times in which the wealthy wage war on the poor overseas while disciplining and dragooning the poor at home. It will be for future Parliaments to connect with that heartbeat and renew the work of finally building a socially just Scotland. ■

John McAllion was an MSP from 1999 until 2003

100 strategies and nothing changing?

Poverty and Social Justice may be back on the agenda, but are the policies having a real impact? Peter Kelly takes a look at some of the key policies and assesses whether they are working.

Looking back from the vantage point of 2003 it is sometimes easy to forget that there was a time when issues of poverty, social inclusion and exclusion were off the agenda of central government. Back in the 1980s the language of government was about rolling back the (welfare) state, tackling the 'enemy within', and denying the existence of society. The policies were considerably more damaging than the language. Privatisation, the poll tax, anti-trade union legislation, the scrapping of protection for low paid workers and an increasingly harsh social security system all contributed to the growth in the number of people living in poverty in Scotland and the UK. The policy agenda that was pursued during the 1980s and early 1990s, combined with ongoing structural changes in the UK economy, meant that thousands were effectively excluded from the labour market, and the communities they lived in declined through a lack of real investment and jobs and public services.

The impact of these changes has been well documented. Poverty and inequality increased rapidly in the 1980s and 90s to the extent that more than one third of children lived in poor households. Despite the best efforts of those outside government, whether local authorities, voluntary organisations, or trade unions, there was very little that could be done to tackle the root causes of poverty.

With the election of the Labour government in 1997 poverty was back on the political agenda. Ambitious targets were set, including most notably the eradication of child poverty by 2020, as well as a new commitment to tackle problems associated with social exclusion such as homelessness, drug misuse, teenage pregnancy and youth crime. In Scotland, the driving force behind the reestablishment of the Scottish Parliament was the desire to create a more socially just and inclusive society. The Parliament also provided a new focus for all those attempting to reverse the damage that had been inflicted over the previous 20 years.

However, with more than four years of social justice policy in Scotland, many people are now questioning how far the strategy has got us, and whether there is in fact any real strategy guiding the activity of the Scottish Executive. Reports from the Scottish Poverty Information Unit and the New Policy Institute have noted that despite all the action that has been undertaken in the past four years, levels of child poverty in Scotland have declined only marginally. The Scotsman (19 May 2003) branded the Social Inclusion Partnership (SIP) initiative 'a failure', arguing that almost

£300 million had been soaked up by 'agencies, quangos and placemen' with poorer communities 'no better off.' Added to this, National Statistics has published data showing that income inequality, after falling slightly under the Major government, has increased again in the last few years.

It would be foolish to believe that dealing with the legacy of poverty and inequality that was inherited by Labour was going to be a straightforward matter. Simple solutions to problems of such complexity do not exist, and it is important for all of those working to see an end to poverty in Scotland (including government) to remember this. But complexity cannot be used as an excuse for lack of progress. Too many people are still facing the same problems they faced in 1999, when the Scottish Parliament was first established. Does this mean that the solutions being pursued by the Scottish Executive are simply not working, and if this is the case, what policies should they be replaced with?

From the outset the Scottish Executive has adopted a cross cutting approach to tackling poverty and exclusion. The problems are not within the domain of any one Ministry, nor are the solutions. Different ministries within the Executive must therefore work in partnership to achieve the social justice targets. In theory then, all Executive policies should contribute to the aims of achieving social justice. These aims are set out in five main policy areas: children, young people, families, older people and communities. It is important when considering whether the Scottish Executive has been successful in achieving social inclusion to look at all their activities, not simply at the perceived failings of the SIPs.

With regard to children, the long-term targets are to eliminate child poverty within a generation and improve literacy for all children leaving primary school. Some of the main activities in this area have been the Sure Start Scotland programme. This programme is designed to improve children's social and emotional development, health, ability to learn and to strengthen families and communities. With such broad aims Sure Start includes a range of services and types of delivery and therefore entails joint working across sectors. Among the services supported have been childminders, crèches, support for parents, playgroups, etc. Another key Executive policy has been the development of New Community Schools, which the Executive describes as "a radical initiative in Scotland to modernise schools, raise attainment and

promote social inclusion". Again this brings together health, education and social work in order to give support to families and children.

The long-term targets for young people are to ensure that all 19 years are in education, training or employment and that all young people leave school with the highest level of qualifications and skills possible. Executive initiatives include the New Futures Fund to help the most disadvantaged young people find work, Enterprise in Education to help foster young people's 'enterprise skills', training programmes such as Skillseekers and Modern Apprenticeships. Full employment is the long-term target within the Families policy area, although this is represented as 'in the modern sense of opportunity for all.' Much of the work here focuses on skills training and lifelong learning through the programmes such as the Scottish University for Industry, Community Learning Partnerships and Careers Scotland.

There have been a number of very practical policies to help improve the lives of older people in Scotland. The Executive has committed itself to eradicating fuel poverty for all vulnerable households by 2016. Part of the strategy here is to ensure that everyone over the age of 60 has central heating and that homes are properly insulated. The extension of concessionary travel for older people with disabilities has also been undertaken, but this depends on the participation of local authorities.

Community is the final policy area, and one that is set to become increasingly important. The return of the coalition government in May saw the replacement of the Minister for Social Justice with the Minister for Communities. Although many of the policies designed to promote social inclusion, such as SIPs, have always been area based, the creation of the Communities Ministry does seem to suggest a more focused approach on what may become seen as 'problem areas'. Some of the initiatives within the Communities policy area have included efforts to promote digital inclusion, the training for work programme, and the Active Communities Strategy. The most high profile, and at times controversial, element of activity has been the SIPs which have been central to the Executive's desire to close the gap between poorer communities and 'the rest of Scotland'.

Since the election, anti-social behaviour has become the priority for the Executive in relation to communities, and it

would appear with its social justice policies. Issues such as youth crime and anti-social behaviour have always been part of the Executive's social inclusion strategy, but now it seems that such concerns have moved to the centre of the policy agenda. There is little doubt that petty crime, vandalism and anti-social behaviour are real issues within communities across Scotland and must be taken seriously, but their elevation to this central position in the fight against poverty and social exclusion may divert the Executive from issues that are more directly related to poverty and social exclusion.

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The range of initiatives discussed above, although by no means exhaustive, suggests that the Scottish Executive has taken the problem of poverty seriously and taken action to tackle it where it can. However the evidence on the success of these initiatives is mixed. On key long-term goals, such as the eradication of child poverty, very little progress has been made, although key initiatives including Sure Start Scotland are regarded as having had a generally positive impact on the parents and children that have been involved. A significant problem for the Executive is that many of the key policy levers that could have a significant effect on poverty, such as benefit levels or Tax Credits, remain under the control of Westminster. This fact was highlighted by a recent report into spending on child poverty by the Scottish Parliament's Finance Committee, which recommended better co-ordination between Scotland and UK government if child poverty targets are to be met. This report also noted the lack of 'joined-up' government between

the Executive, Westminster and 'community levels', with poverty being seen as a peripheral to their concern of many key departments.

Almost all of the anti-poverty and social inclusion policies that have come from the Executive have emphasised the importance of partnership working between agencies and community involvement in the development of initiatives. This partnership approach has been a key element of the original Social Justice Strategy, as seen in the creation of SIPs, the Scottish Social Inclusion Network (now scrapped), and in the Community Planning Partnerships. Numerous reports show that there may still be some way to go in creating genuine partnership working to tackle poverty and social exclusion, and if the Executive is to lead a coordinated response to the problems we face then such genuine partnerships will be necessary. ■

Peter Kelly is Policy and Information Manager at the Poverty Alliance. For more information visit www.povertyalliance.org

when partnerships go wrong...

David Maguire argues that looking at what has happened in a community partnership which has failed raises some important questions about the current approach to poverty

Over the past few years, Craigmillar, Scotland's fourth poorest community according to the Executive's deprivation index, has been the scene of a simmering conflict involving community, council and partnership. Although quieter today, sensationalist headlines, consultants' reports, project closures and enforced restructuring have ensured that the area is rarely off the front page of the local press for long. Even last year, the local Social Inclusion Partnership was deemed unsatisfactory by Communities Scotland. The discourse of partnership dominates much community work and adult education today. It's truly hegemonic in that discussions focus on how to do it rather than on why we're doing it in the first place. But what about when partnerships go wrong? What about when they're beset by a low intensity propaganda war – occasionally with casualties – and the partnership process prevents anyone from analysing it or even acknowledging that it's there in any public sense?

The crisis in Craigmillar can be characterised in all sorts of ways – 'jobs for the boys', 'jobs for the consultants', 'social justice by numbers', 'strategies for strategies', 'attacks on a shining beacon of community development' (I've heard all of these in the last year alone). Disputes boil and simmer and are often overlaid or underpinned by personal enmities. They sometimes seem to have little to do with political ideology. But people HAVE tried to think about it in political ways, often as an internal party clash between 'Old' and 'New' Labour. If it is, then it's often about the worst of both – the number-crunching managerialism of the 'New' versus the 'leave it up to us, we know what we're doing' paternalistic 'mateship' of the 'Old'. The trouble is that the 'Old' isn't averse to managerialism either and the 'New' has pals too. (None of this is meant as a personal attack on anyone – on a personal level, some of the key players on both sides are quite nice people really!)

Power oscillates between the two and people, activists, workers or the large part of the community which isn't involved, trade the latest tittle-tattle in the hope of capturing what's going on (and, of course, appearing to be 'in the know'). In reality, power moves in ways that you don't even see, with a fluidity that's remarkable. All you get is a temporary snapshot and it's a pretty grainy one at that. You become a spectator in the back row of social inclusion. Meanwhile, the blame culture stalks its next victim, the spectre of the front page of the paper haunts us all and vast amounts of energy are expended on things that don't matter. (I've never been much of a one for psychology but the mental health effects of all of this

would make for a fascinating research project).

So what's to be done? How can an alternative discourse be constructed? How can power be made visible and challenged? Indeed, how many local people believe this is even possible and how many workers think it is desirable? So far, political interventions have foundered. They have also seemed a little opportunistic. Both the Scottish National Party and the Scottish Socialist Party contested the 1999 local election on an anti-'cronyist'/anti-'jobs for boys' theme. The theme has been highlighted in the city paper and, according to some, by the local council. However it represents at best a partial understanding of the picture and doesn't always strike that much of a chord locally, except in a very general sense of resentment towards anyone in a position of power, however modest or marginal. The personalisation of complex community issues and the oversimplification of a whole set of problems did more to fuel the anger of local people than it did to address their concerns, as a group of Scottish Socialist Party activists found out to their peril in a local pub! Neither party got many votes.

A campaign in the local community premised on a similar broad theme reached its height at a stormy AGM in 1999. But the self-styled Craigmillar Regeneration Action Group was poorly organised, lacked credibility and alienated many people when it seemed to be attacking all local projects and workers. In the event, it was easily outmanoeuvred in a classic piece of incorporation. It didn't stand a chance and it probably didn't deserve one either.

What you don't often hear about this community is the incredible amount of work that goes on in it, paid and unpaid. Most of it is done by local people. Craigmillar has created and nurtured a thriving civil society, rich in diversity and history. Despite the general gloom, it continues to flourish (the gloom is offset by a nice line in 'gallows humour' anyway). Much of its history is a source of justifiable local pride. It is worth defending, as is much of what goes on today. The managerialists will find the values associated with the culture difficult to enumerate and they might not fit with Capital City or Scottish Executive Social Justice Milestones (passed any of them lately?) either. But they're valuable nonetheless. Ideas like solidarity, equality, and the need to confront injustice flourish in this area. There's a sense of struggle in Craigmillar.

Can this organic culture of the organised community be harnessed more explicitly to progressive ends? Could

it ever form the basis of a culture of resistance? One problem is the fear factor. Everyone seems to be over the proverbial barrel – activists are tied in with the partnership, workers are monitored and evaluated with renewed intensity (and, of course, we respond by thinking of yet more ways in which we can provide information or ‘market’ ourselves), even the managerialists have cause for concern. Everyone is cautious – hardly the basis for radical action. Meanwhile, inequality grows – despite the milestones – and the quiet desperation of poverty blights and shortens peoples’ lives. Nobody can campaign against it but don’t worry, I’m sure there’s an objective about it somewhere. It’s due to be solved in a few years time anyway, isn’t it? The problem is that we’re all responsible for managing it now and we’ve got to solve it ourselves. The fact that it’s difficult to see how that which isn’t caused locally can be solved on a purely local basis doesn’t get much of an airing. If we get angry, a local project might be put in the firing line, somebody will get the blame and it’ll only be seen as a problem of service delivery anyway and a new strategy will have to be devised.

What I want to suggest is a community development approach based on problematising partnership. It doesn’t have to mean withdrawing, but it might mean thinking some unthinkable thoughts. It will mean creating spaces where people can think, analyse, reflect and imagine; where people can learn and formulate alternatives or make demands. It will mean looking around to see if anyone else feels like this in other parts of the city, and not just on the big estates (or, in the present nomenclature, the Social Inclusion Partnership areas – the policy-created areas rebranded in line with the latest policy). It will mean looking further afield as well. Some of the work I’ve been involved in makes me believe that there’s a real

Some of the work I’ve been involved in makes me believe that there’s a real appetite for work that is about real democracy and real anger, for work that is, even if only in some senses, opposed to the prevailing managerialist hegemony

appetite for this, for work that is about real democracy and real anger, for work that is, even if only in some senses, opposed to the prevailing managerialist hegemony.

Of course, none of this is new. The Community Development Projects of the late sixties and early seventies were set up with the aim of improving the co-ordination of service delivery in ‘deprived’ areas, by implication, of finding out what was ‘wrong’ with the people there. Some of the language, certainly most of the underpinning assumptions, sound eerily familiar today. So why did people connect across geographical boundaries and challenge power then? My understanding is that a systematic analysis of problems in ‘problem areas’ showed a remarkable degree of similarity. The argument then moved from lack of co-ordination and community pathology to structural inequality (albeit limited to class inequality). Surely it’s exactly the same now – though other inequalities need to be confronted too – but with different structures. The point is we’re looking in the wrong places for the causes of problems and therefore we’re not going to get anything right.

So what does all this mean for us as workers? Of course we have to do what we do – adult education should be adult education, credit unions should be credit unions and so on – but maybe we can do so around a more challenging agenda. Anyone reckon it’s worth a try? ■

David Maguire has worked in adult education and community development with communities and activists in Edinburgh for more than ten years. He is currently the Empowering Communities Worker in Craigmillar although this article is written in a personal capacity

The Scottish Left Review in association with the STUC and the Scottish Pensioners Forum

Pensions – the facts, not the scare stories

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unpopular saviours

With stress, low moral and acute recruitment difficulties, social work in Scotland is in crisis. Ronnie Stevenson looks at the reasons.

An increasing gap in the distribution of wealth and power in our society accompanied the development of capitalism in the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This led to many people becoming casualties of a society which broke up many of the mutual support systems which looked after the most vulnerable in society. Support services to people in trouble originated in the works of many well meaning 'philanthropists' in the nineteenth century and early twentieth century. There were services to abused young people, orphaned young people, older people, people with a disability, people in prison and many other vulnerable people. These services developed in an uncoordinated fashion and often their direction came from the needs of organisations rather than from the needs of the people in trouble.

These organisations developed into large private organisations with those not making a profit being seen as charities. Whilst originally run by well meaning amateurs, often with large private means, they are now, as often as not, run by well paid directors and funded by public money. With the gradual growth in the strength of the organised working class and its political organisations then there were increasing demands for the state either at local or central government level to set up universal provision of services to the vulnerable. Social Work Services developed in the local government sector.

Politicians in a civil society over the years have placed more and more duties, responsibilities, laws, regulations, procedures etc on local government. These have not always been accompanied by the consequent increase in resources and this is the origin of the crisis in social work. This has partly arisen from an ambivalent attitude towards social work services by politicians and an often-populist response to prejudices shown by the community. Instead of explaining to the public and informing them of the complex task the politicians spout simplistic solutions. Of course they don't tackle the fundamental discrepancy in power and wealth in our society because that would threaten their own privileged position.

Witness the recent 'discussion' on youth crime. Social workers don't need to be told of the anti social effects of the behaviour of a minority of our youth because we deal with the youth and their victims. The politicians want draconian punishments introduced. There has been no mention of education, leisure facilities or real jobs with decent wages, to name but a few pertinent points which

need to be brought into the discussion as well as other proven ways of getting young people to become less anti-social.

The crisis in social work has been headlined through the shortage of qualified social workers, the foot soldiers of the frontline fieldwork services. The internecine warfare between employers to grab the few social workers available has also dominated the headlines. However it must be emphasised that there are problems in all areas of social work services and the origins are similar. The absence of proper workforce planning by senior managers, local government employers and central government policy makers is the cause of the shortage. The reasons for the shortage are complex.

The poor workforce planning touches on other areas. Inadequate basic staffing levels, nothing to do with a shortage of suitably qualified workers, leads in residential and day services to individual workers having too much work to do in a shift. Too many clients to look after creates many of the stress problems in the sector and can create difficulties of client rage and violence towards staff. Of course the shortage of qualified workers for fieldwork has meant that the figures of staff to vulnerable population currently imposed in staffing establishments has never been put to the test. Over the last decades then not enough people have come forward to become qualified social workers. The job is not seen as having status or adequately paid and in a chicken and egg situation the shortage causes overwork, strain and stress which make the job seem less attractive.

The brutality of capitalism leaves many people struggling to survive and social work services have been charged with taking care of the worst of the casualties. They are often those with whom many state services don't want to be involved. Part of the social work services task has been to advocate on behalf of those rejected by society. This doesn't make social workers the most popular people in the world, as they often have to confront society with the way it treats its victims. The victims aren't helpless and part of the social work task is to seek to empower them. Empowering those rejected by society can be an unpopular task.

Politicians and the media have played a crucial role in undermining the status of the social work services workforce. Alternatively they blame social workers for intervening and for not intervening without trying to

establish all the facts and then seeking to explain the complexities of the situation. The headline cases in which social work services have been put under scrutiny have tended to seek to blame individuals. Rarely is there any mention of the thousands, whose lives are improved through the actions of the undervalued, underpaid and committed social work services workforce. The politicians never accept responsibility for the shortage of resources or for the sort of society that gives rise to the problems, which they expect their social work services workforce to sort out. If you are given a demanding and stressful task and your employer constantly blames individual workers for any problems it's little wonder that workers feel undervalued and leave. The constant carping from the media makes the job seem unattractive and puts people off even entering the workforce in the first place.

If your job is undervalued then good pay can be a factor in helping you to stick it out. There is more money in so many more comparable jobs from lawyers to engineers. The career patterns are similar but society pays them better. It is a sad commentary on our society that the politicians value more the producers of house conveyancing documents or wills than they do the producers of reports that are crucial to the future lives of our children and young people, to name but one example.

It wouldn't take a genius to realise that raising the status and pay of the social work services workforce would improve the situation of crisis in social work services. That would have to be accompanied by a massive investment in training. Outsiders to social work services are always struck by the low level of resources allocated to training, at the beginning and throughout the lifetime of the workforce. A recent government initiative is to create the Scottish Social Service Council whose primary aim is to create a regulated competent and confident workforce. It is early days but in the social work service agencies their aim is under-resourced.

With regard to the headline shortage of qualified social workers in the frontline fieldwork service then

the response of the Scottish Executive and the Local Government employers has been pathetic. At a time when there is a need for training, one of the existing training courses in Scotland is under threat. The paying off of the loans of graduates coming into certain areas of social work is welcome but inadequate. The part funding of about sixty new students studying for a social work qualification bears little comparison to the four hundred vacancies which exist. Some of the proposals for organisational change in social work services, joint future, a Scottish penal service, shaking up child protection, are of the 'rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic' type variety. Even the possibility of success of the welcome ones is slight as long as they are under-resourced.

The local government employers have been using money saved because they can't fill the posts to offer sweeteners to poach workers from one authority to another. Instead of national planning to improve status and wages and a massive crash training programme we have short-term grabs for workers. Unfortunately the mechanism to sort out a national grade for social workers was lost when the leadership of the local authority unions persuaded the members to vote for the Single Status deal, which despite certain advantages did away with national bargaining. The Scottish executive and the

employers don't give the impression of having the will or imagination to tackle the crisis.

The crisis in social work is one of the politicians making. Unfortunately the politicians show no sign of making an effort to apply the solutions required to address the crisis either in the short term or even more worryingly in the long term. Yet again the unions representing the workforce are forced to pursue the agenda and force the employers to tackle the issue. ■

The politicians never accept responsibility for the shortage of resources or for the sort of society that gives rise to the problems, which they expect their social work services workforce to sort out

Ronnie Stevenson is Social Work Services Shop Stewards Convenor for Glasgow City Unison. He is writing in a personal capacity.

the fear of fairness

Paul Hutcheon argues that hostility from social conservatives has cowed the Scottish Parliament into ducking the question of what kind of Scotland we want

“A Bill on gay marriage is not a priority,” said one MSP to me. “The public will think that we’re only interested in dog dirt, fox-hunting and homosexuals.” While Patrick Harvie’s civil partnerships Bill may be a modest step on the road to equality, it deserved more than the political side-stepping it received. To say that boosting the Scottish economy should take precedence over ‘trivial’ subjects such as civil partnerships was patronising – as if MSPs are incapable of dealing with both. The idea that reforming Scottish Enterprise somehow precludes the introduction of social legislation is absurd.

The proposal was enough to wind-up the usual suspects. Brian Souter, we were told, wasn’t happy. The Catholic Church, shock horror, was adamantly opposed. But while these responses were predictable, the equivocation of MSPs was disappointing. Issues of sexual orientation should interest any politician with a commitment to equality, and MSPs have a duty to recognise the Bill and question the assumptions that underpin it. Their lukewarm reaction was due to the fallout from the repeal of Section 28. The legacy of that furore is that MSPs have allowed themselves to be intimidated by elements within society that are hostile to anything which is supposedly harmful to ‘the family’. Following the horrors of Keep the Clause, the remainder of the first term saw MSPs tiptoe around other people’s prejudices, afraid to raise issues for fear of upsetting Brian Souter. Instead of the Parliament confronting vested interests and challenging bigoted attitudes, MSPs did not have the stomach for making Scotland a more tolerant, just and equal country.

However, the second term provides many opportunities for the advancement of social liberalism, and there is cross-party support for radical social change. Both the SSP and the Greens are socially liberal parties, and they should provide a block vote to promote issues the Executive is reluctant to embrace. And with their manifesto commitment for legislation on civil partnerships, the LibDems should be relied upon to provide votes on key issues. An informal pact of Greens, Socialists, Liberals and Independents could bring a set of issues to the chamber that would kickstart a debate on the sort of nation Scotland is to become. It would also allow socially liberal Nats and Labour members to back change while forcing doubters to clarify their positions. The Left should pick up the baton of cultural liberalism and run with it.

Central to cultural liberalism is the belief that government has no business picking a winner from a range of lifestyles. Many of the issues that should unite Scotland’s Left involve ending statutory discrimination and require the updating of antiquated laws. First on the agenda should be the swift passage of the civil partnerships legislation, a Bill so uncontroversial that it could only offend the narrowest of minds. (In fact, so uncontroversial that Westminster is going to introduce it.) Patrick Harvie’s Bill proposes that same-sex and unmarried couples should have similar rights to married couples. It would mean that unmarried couples would be able to register their relationship and be entitled to equal treatment on tax, welfare, insurance, property and legacies. With similar laws having been passed in France, Germany, Sweden and the Netherlands and with the rest of the UK about to join this list, it’s not as if Scotland would be the laboratory for a dangerous experiment. Only in Scotland is equality ‘not a priority’.

Unlike the Section 28 debacle, in which parents were led to believe that their children would be exposed to gay pornography, civil partnerships will affect no-one except those people who are not treated equally before the law. All that married couples will lose is their privileged status. And MSPs have no right to get moralistic: one glance around the Chamber will confirm that many have chosen domestic arrangements that are at variance with the nuclear family. Politicians on the Mound are a microcosm of the population: married and divorced; gay and straight; spinster and bachelor. It’s about time Scots law reflected Scottish society.

The Left should also man the barricades for an effective sexual health strategy. The first four years of devolution produced plans on cancer, heart disease, diabetes and mental health, but action wasn’t taken to improve sexual health. While Malcolm Chisholm has set up an Expert Group, delay only adds to an increasingly worrying situation. With teenage pregnancies and STD infections on the increase, sexual health and reproductive services do not show any sign of improving. Measures could be taken immediately to alleviate these problems. The Left should call for all schools in receipt of taxpayers’ money to include sex education on the curriculum, and argue that contraception should be more widely available in schools and family planning clinics. Abortion services should also be tailored to the needs of women rather than the sensitivities of health care professionals. Finally, emergency contraception should be made available to all

women, not just those who can afford the £24 charge. It is an affront that poorer women, who are most often affected by unplanned pregnancies, are the ones disadvantaged by restricted access to the MAP.

Another priority for the Left should be to ensure that the Executive doesn't backtrack on its commitment to liberalise divorce law. Although there is a tentative proposal for 'quickie divorces', the First Minister's legislative programme did not mention a Family Law Bill. Divorce law is antiquated and judgmental, suitable for an era in which marriages were long-lasting and divorce rare. Although reform has been mocked by the Conservatives, halving the separation period from two years to one is an essential part of the drive to civilise Scotland. Given that over 40% of marriages end in divorce, the current law is no longer in touch with realities of 21st century Scotland. The Left should argue that statutes must reflect the complexities of modern society and stress that it is not the Government's job to play Happy Families or keep unhappy couples together.

Assisted suicide is another area worthy of legislation. During the passage of the Adults with Incapacity Act, both the Health Minister and the Health Committee were quick to reassure the public, and Cardinal Winning, that the Bill did not amount to euthanasia by the back door. However, the politicians shouldn't have panicked – a majority of Britons back assisted suicide provided certain conditions are met. When it comes to defending personal freedom and promoting autonomy, MSPs are out of step with the people they represent. The Assisted Dying Bill in the House of Lords is a template for change. It decrees that an adult suffering from a terminal disease or an incurable physical illness can request medical assistance to die. Two doctors would have to confirm the diagnosis, following which the patient would have to make a written statement declaring their wish to die. This would be witnessed by a solicitor, who would make a judgement on the patient's mental competence. While it may be too soon to expect a Bill in this Parliament, sympathetic politicians like Tommy Sheridan and Robin Harper could bring the issue to the Chamber.

The Left could also make a positive contribution to the debate on fighting crime. Although drug laws are reserved to Westminster, their implementation is a matter for police forces answerable to the Scottish Parliament. It is

farfarcical to arrest people for possession of small amounts of cannabis. 'Victimless crimes' should be ignored in favour of tackling violent crime; laws should either be enforced or repealed. Such a policy would be in keeping with other sensible measures like drugs courts, needle exchanges and the prescription of heroin to addicts. With the mainstream parties unwilling to deal with these uncomfortable subjects, a space exists for the Left to advance common sense solutions to complex problems

Another piece of the jigsaw is Margo MacDonald's Prostitution Tolerance Zones Bill. Although it was soundly defeated in the first term, it has been reintroduced and MSPs such as Susan Deacon and Elaine Smith have changed their minds and backed it. The issue

is interesting because it seems to be following the pattern of all taboo subjects: first, the idea is ridiculed; second, the person proposing the idea is mocked; and third, the policy is welcomed and passed. When abortion was legalised in 1967, the end of civilization was predicted. Nearly forty years on, the Act has little chance of being repealed. With a stronger Green and Socialist presence in the second Scottish Parliament, the vote on tolerance zones will be much closer next time.

Through tapping into the younger generation's impatience with established orthodoxy and scorn for traditional values, there is an opportunity for the Left to

make electoral gains and, more importantly, to transform Scotland. While people don't want politicians telling them what to do, what to smoke, who to sleep with and which relationships are valid, they do expect their elected representatives to clarify the legislative framework that is or isn't in place to protect them. The only requirement in the debate on 'gay marriage' is that MSPs state their position and give reasons for it. It's an insult to those who campaigned for devolution to suggest that certain subjects aren't worthy of time in the chamber. If the Parliament isn't about furthering equality it isn't about anything at all. Far from undermining the Parliament, defending and promoting cultural liberalism would be a potential vote winner. ■

Paul Hutcheon edits Holyrood, a magazine that covers the Scottish Parliament

something wrong with this debate

Orla Mulholland argues that a consensual solution to the question of separate schooling in Scotland might be found if an approach of integration rather than abolition was taken

The debate on Catholic schools around the end of last year was fairly dispiriting. The usual suspects brought out the usual arguments, and, as usual, almost everyone else gave up on the issue as intractable and best left alone. Most political parties avoided any thorough discussion, regarding the question as an electoral can of worms they could well do without in the approaching election campaign. But the fact that no resolution appeared from the debate that took place does not mean that none is possible. Post-election, it is worth re-examining the debate, as much for what was not said as for the positions which were defended with such rancour.

There were three kinds of contribution. First, there's Kirsty Wark, who kicked off the whole argument, joined by Billy MacNeill. Their comments simply addressed the existing division in education and the negative effects it has had on the lives of people in Scotland. Neither was pursuing the issue as part of a larger ideological position, and they did not speak about abolition of Catholic schools, the role of religion in education, parental choice, faith schools, or whether Catholic schools are responsible for sectarianism, the themes which occupied the rest of the debate. They spoke as individuals who grew up in the West of Scotland and they simply expressed their conviction that, in Kirsty Wark's words, 'there's something wrong'.

In the second category I would place – together – the Catholic hierarchy and the atheists, humanists and secularists who opposed them in the letters page of *The Herald* and elsewhere. For these people the divided educational establishment is just one issue in a long-standing ideological squabble. I do not mean to trivialise the real issues at stake in general debates about secularism and the role of religious organisations in public life, I just note that once this second group of commentators took over, the experience of generations of Scottish schoolchildren became a secondary point. And as soon as the argument turned into yet another re-run of 'the hierarchy versus humanism', there was no chance of arriving at a workable compromise for the simple reason that neither side has any interest in finding one.

It suits both sides to push all comment to the most extreme positions possible. For the humanists, the desired end result would be for the Catholic church to be forced to give up its role in education, admit its wickedness and hang its head in shame. The problems caused by divided education are pieces of evidence to back up this aim, so the church's

contribution must be painted as black as possible. For the hierarchy, which can be relied on to fight tooth and nail to defend any political or social powers it has achieved, this is a gift. It's so much easier to dismiss an extremist opponent than a moderate, pragmatic one, and easier again if the opponent is clearly motivated by an ideological agenda rather than a direct concern for people.

It was with this paradoxically shared interest in polarising debate that we heard that Catholic schools – and not a century and a half of bitter anti-Catholic discrimination – are to blame for sectarianism in Scotland. And, crucially, in this context it was insisted that the only alternative to the status quo is to close down every Catholic school in Scotland. The more obvious approach, of integration rather than abolition, was of no interest to either side.

The comments of the third group of people who contributed to the debate – the politicians – were very troubling for Scottish democracy. Jack McConnell made the innocuous suggestion of promoting shared campuses for Catholic and non-denominational schools, already in place in some cases. After one newspaper article by a Catholic archbishop, the First Minister immediately withdrew his comments. The Scottish press unaccountably promoted Mario Conti and Peter Kearney to the position of 'the Catholic community', but for the head of the government to do the same is pretty scary. There is no sense in which the Catholic hierarchy 'represents' the Catholic population of Scotland – the church has never claimed to be a democratic institution. Catholic people vote and take part in the political process themselves: when did church leaders get a block vote to use on their behalf? Although Jack McConnell stuck his neck out furthest, the Liberals and Nationalists had much the same line – no new policies if the archbishop starts shouting.

So where does that leave us? The principal result would seem to be that change in the education system has been put off-limits for the foreseeable future. But Kirsty Wark's initial point still stands – there's something wrong with a system which splits up friends at the age of five and creates a religious division in a central aspect of community life. A very large number of Scots agree with that proposition. In the Scottish Social Attitudes Survey (2001), 59 per cent of Scots who identified themselves as Catholic believed that Catholic schools should be 'phased out'. There is not in fact any discrepancy between that result and the *HERALD* opinion poll in which only 29 per cent of Catholics supported

the abolition of RC schools. The two surveys asked different questions: abolition, implying the closure of all Catholic schools, is only one way of changing the status quo, and the most drastic. Has there ever been a school closure which did not provoke fierce local opposition? The fact that almost a third of Catholics backed even this draconian step is a measure of just how strong the wish for change really is.

So why do parents send their kids to Catholic schools? Although the historical legacy of discrimination was discussed last year, most commentators and all the big parties seem agreed that parents are exercising their choice for religious schooling, 'opting out' into faith schools. Where is the integrated mainstream they are opting out of? In the areas where separate RC schools exist, there is de facto segregation. With one set of schools predominantly Catholic, given the historical division of these communities the other schools by default are predominantly Protestant, despite a genuine desire for non-denominationalism. You either opt out of the Catholic side of the community or you opt out of the non-Catholic side of it. There is no uncontentious, shared tradition of education for anyone to opt in to. And there's no 'choice' until such an option has been created. The only way that can be done is by integrating the two existing traditions, not by closing down one of them.

With that aim, instead of arguing for and against the Catholic system as a unit, we might look at what the differences are between the two kinds of school and see how they could be aligned. The claim that Catholic institutions provide a special 'holistic educational approach' requires a serious pinch of salt. If there is such a thing as a Catholic chemistry lesson, I never got one. We did the O-Grade course like everyone else. Even the religious education classes I received in a Catholic secondary school seem to have been much the same as what my friends were taught in non-denominational institutions. From time to time there were church services held during school hours, but not very frequently. If the religious images were removed from the walls, you could spend weeks at a Catholic school without noticing any difference from a non-denominational school.

Primary schools are a little different as a (fairly small) number of hours per week are given over to formal

religious instruction. Could non-denominational primaries make room for this to take place there too? Other religious groups would then be able to have the same provision as Catholicism. The humanists would like that even less than the bishops, but is it such a bad idea? I do not personally hold any religious convictions but I recognise that thousands of Scots do. As Muslims, for example, are now facing the same negative public attitudes that Catholics once had to deal with, it would be good to let young children know that the religion they and their families practise at home is not just tolerated at school, it is actually welcome.

Before devolution, RC schools' permission to veto teaching materials on moral issues made little difference, but there is increasing divergence. The repeal of Section 28 does not apply to Catholic schools. Neither do the eminently sensible new approaches to teaching drugs awareness and sexual health. This is the one point for which Section-28-style opposition can be expected, but, as with Section 28, it is too important to give up. Catholic school students have the same range of social habits as their non-Catholic friends, and they have a right to the same level of advice and support. But contrary to what church spokesmen might have us believe, the division in opinion on these issues cuts across the Catholic community just as it does the rest of Scottish society.

Administrative differences are that RC schools may choose Catholic staff in preference to non-Catholics and all staff must be 'approved' as to their moral character by the diocese. Both points are thoroughly objectionable, but they are heartily resented within the Catholic educational system itself. Few non-bishops would lament them.

Those are the only differences. In all of them, change would win wide support among both Catholics and non-Catholics. That would give an identical educational framework for both school types, and all schools could then be assigned a local catchment zone. And it could all be done with very little fuss – it'd be a shame if we let it stay off the agenda for long, no matter who starts shouting. ■

Orla Mulholland is a free-lance journalist based in Berlin

The Scottish press unaccountably promoted Mario Conti and Peter Kearney to the position of 'the Catholic community', but for the head of the government to do the same is pretty scary

democracy – for others

Book Review: 'The Velvet Coup' by Daniel Lazare, Verso, £15 (hardback),
Reviewed by John Kay

This book is a 'must read' at a time when the world is being assailed by and lectured on, the superior benefits of American democracy and the application of its principles to nations perceived as 'problematic' – or just plain evil – by Bush and Blair. It is a penetrating analysis of the reality of the American democratic process related to a Constitution which is regarded as absolutely sacrosanct and within which a George W Bush can fraudulently gain the Presidency. Lazare shows in great detail how this was achieved and with the active involvement of the highest legal authority, the Supreme Court, within the Constitution.

Bill Clinton is quoted: "Our founders crafted a Constitution that would meet every challenge". This at a time when the constitutional system was facing problems of counting votes, and not just in Florida where the count degenerated into a farce, eventually leading to the Supreme Court's 'Velvet Coup' (more on this later). Afterwards a Republican Senator said "the Constitution which has served us well for 200 years has triumphed once again", yet the Constitution's performance in the November/December 2000 Presidential Election scandals proved that far from being infallible the Constitution was extremely fallible and prone to breakdowns. More importantly, Lazare asserts that these failures to guarantee the democratic process and especially the election process show that America is not a democracy in the full modern sense of the word. It is rather an 18th Century republic that resembles democracy in certain respects but at its core remains stubbornly anti-democratic.

Some astonishing facts emerge. Supreme Court statement, 12 December 2000: "the individual citizen has no constitutional right to vote for the President". The Supreme Court has a five member conservative majority and was merely stating what Lazare claims is obvious to anyone who reads Article II of the Constitution, which states "the power to choose members of the Electoral College [which elects the President] lies with the State legislators rather than the people at large". Millions of Americans believe that voting in Presidential Elections is a fundamental democratic right – the Supreme Court is telling them it doesn't exist. All of us have been regaled over the years in the movies and on TV with this wonderful

US Constitution (think West Wing) and we tend to accept it, but this Constitution and the Bill of rights are actually a holdover from the days when not even the most radical politicians believed people should be free to run the government as a whole.

Modern democracy anywhere is a fragile creature, barely seconds old in historical time and we here in Britain have to depend at present on the alleged benefits of our 'unwritten constitution', but we do not understand that real democracy depends on the positive freedom of the people to effectively control our society. But in America, as Lazare demonstrates, an unelected judiciary can lightly toss aside the results of a popular election (Gore won the popular vote) because it would take too much time to count a vote. This Supreme Court is no less political than any other body in Washington, as its members are appointed by the President subject to approval by Congress. All US society bears the Constitutional stamp, with an entire legal and political system derived from a 4,400-word, 200-year-old document – not the most modern but the most antique.

America is an 18th Century republic that resembles democracy in certain respects

Rethinking the Constitution, Lazare asserts, means rethinking the USA as a whole. Its citizens have never dared do this; they believe in scientific and technological progress but believe the opposite in terms of constitutional development. The founders' teaching perfect! They represent an unsurpassable peak of human wisdom!

This results in some truly bizarre situations which Lazare recounts with glee. Election contests where candidates try to claim that they will be better than their opponent at executing 'the will of 18th Century tribal patriarchs' and to win they each endeavour to paint themselves more true to the past than the other candidate. Impeachment (itself a relic of Anglo-Norman law) against Clinton degenerated into a neo-medieval witch-hunt in pursuit of semen-stained dresses and fellatio in the oval office. After Watergate a black congresswoman declared "whole and complete faith" in the Constitution and Lazare asks "did that include the 3/5 Clause etc. that protected slavery for seven decades?" The Senate flouts the principle of one person one vote in granting equal representation to a multi-racial giant like California and a "lily-white rotten burgh" (Lazare's words) like Wyoming whose population is more than 98 per cent smaller.

The book title 'The Velvet Coup' refers to the hijacking by Bush of the Presidential Election in the Florida vote (or non-vote) where mobs of angry Republicans pounded on door sand windows of election vote counting venues and actually invaded them, demanding 'stop the count', roughing up Democrats and using mob violence to cut short the vote count. High ranking Republicans were present, and a Wall Street journalist Paul A Gigot crowed "a neatly timed bourgeois riot". Supreme Court judge Antonian Scala ordered a halt to a recount on grounds that "it threatened irreparable harm to petitioner (Bush) and to the country by casting a cloud on the legitimacy off his election"; as if cutting a recount short does not undermine democratic legitimacy as well.

Lazare argues that Republicans have an inbuilt advantage in an increasingly conservative system that elevates States rights, separation of powers etc., over simple majority rule. In 1962 the Supreme Court declared 'one person one vote' must prevail at State and local levels but that the Constitution effectively bars it at Federal level. He amasses a detailed and devastating indictment of the two-centuries-old system whereby state powers and responsibilities relating to 'free and fair' elections are in the hands of states often antagonistic to Federal government and this ancient Constitution not only denies the Federal Government the power to establish its own democratic credentials, it allows states to undermine it at will (see Florida). The founding fathers made sure that the people instead of being one step removed from government would be two steps removed, and it certainly suits bush and his Government to keep it that way.

Lazare discusses possibilities of change; his conclusions are pessimistic, considering that it's simply unimaginable at this stage for people to see alternatives to the present setup. Is it possible to create an American concept of real popular sovereignty?, he asks, and points out that that would mean creating a force the Constitution does not recognise and is in fact designed to prevent. Amid Rumsfeld's jibes about 'old Europe' it is supremely ironic that his country accepts without question a Constitution dating from a century when it consisted of scattered farms, plantations and homesteads, interspersed with a few coastal cities. It was a decentralised electoral system

befitting a decentralised homespun republic, yet today America thinks it is the newest of the new on the world stage. There is an amendment clause in the Constitution, but it allows 13 states with as little as five per cent of the US population to block constitutional reforms sought by the other 95 per cent. But at least the existence of the amendment clause suggests the venerable Constitution may require fixing from time to time. The relatively unquestioning trust in their political system by the America people allowed, as Lazare shows, in the Iran Contra events, President Reagan and Oliver north to circumvent

Congressional control and funnel aid to the Contra terrorists. Although Reagan and North and others were questioned by Washington committees, the people's representatives sat there and listened as North indicated that "they could not be trusted with sensitive information as they were weak and undisciplined".

In terms of the overall culture, political and otherwise, Lazare paints no brighter a picture. Any self examination of American people has been very personal – of the Old Testament sort. Concepts such as 'chosen people', 'God's own country', 'divine trust' and so on are encouraged, particularly now. US power is proof of its greatness – its greatness proof of its power. The situation at the end of World War II reinforced this, as will Iraq. The scale of the gigantic problem facing American progressives is shown in Lazare's concluding notes. In order to be made safe, US politics must be drained of what little substance it has left – if so economic polarisation will continue, the right wing offensive will intensify and the

US will grow ever more contemptuous of world opinion. 'The Velvet Coup' was published before 11 September 2001, and events since reinforce Lazare's polemic.

Here we have the mightiest nation on earth, exceptionally undemocratic, frozen in terms of political development and punitive in social policy. Its global hegemony proclaimed some years ago by Pearle, Rumsfeld, Cheney and co. – all now in government and representatives of American corporate capitalism – a problem for the rest of the world now and in the future. This book emanating from America is essential study for all of us who hope for change. ■

The Web Review and the Diary will return next issue

Americans believe in scientific and technological progress but believe the opposite in terms of constitutional development. The founders' teaching perfect! They represent an unsurpassable peak of human wisdom!

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