CANNAE WATCH?

In a crisis of democracy for Scotland (and Britain too)

WHO'S GONNAE SAVE US?
The politics of Scotland and Britain are about to enter dark days for democracy. A white, ageing and disproportionately male group of citizens, numbering just 160,000 and nearly all from the middle class, are about to effectively determine who is the next prime minister. The concept of democracy has its origins in the Greek language, combining the whole of a citizenship (‘demos’) with ‘kratos’ meaning power or rule. Unless and until this selected person submits to a popular vote, namely, holding a general election, democracy will be a shadow of its former self. That may sound like historical amnesia given that Theresa May was selected without any vote at all and then did at least try (but failed) to gain a popular mandate. The key difference now though is that there is an impasse in the political system which may be about to be broken by a result – a no-deal Brexit – which even those that voted for Brexit did not quite envisage. Part of this paradox is that the party that won most seats in Britain for the European elections in May was a party without a manifesto and which there is no party membership.

Before this storm arrives from late July onwards, there is some time to pause to reflect on what kind of democracy we have in Britain and what kind of democracy we might wish to have. This is the theme of this issue of Scottish Left Review, and is kicked off by Willie Sullivan and his colleagues. Other articles by the likes of Tommy Sheppard, Neil Davidson, Kenny MacAskill, George Kerevan and Chris Hegarty begin to contextualise these types of broader considerations in the Scottish and British situations. And, in the light of comments by former First Ministers, Henry McLeish and Jack McConnell about creating a second chamber at Holyrood and using proportional representation to elect all MSPs, Paul Cairney looks at what type of democracy our Parliament legitimates.

Democracy can take direct and indirect forms, both parliamentary and non-parliamentary. It used to be the case that the extent of membership of political parties was part of the calculation here. For instance, the Tories had an individual membership of around three million in the 1950s while Labour’s, excluding affiliated membership, was around one million at this time. Tory membership dipped to nearly 100,000 in the early 2010s. Labour party membership is around 540,000 and the SNP’s is around 125,000. Such declines are lamentable but only one part of the overall situation when deducing the current state of democracy.

One of the newer and better ideas to emerge into the mainstream this year has been that of the citizens’ assembly (see Ian Patterson’s article in our March/April 2019 issue but also their propounding by Gordon Brown, Nicola Sturgeon and Rory Stewart as well as Extinction Rebellion). It looks like a much more inviting prospect for popular participation that any politician or party launching a ‘national conversation’. So-called ‘national conversations’ are, in effect, spurious and vacuous because there are no rules, structures or processes put in place, leaving politicians and parties to make what they want of the musings of the commentariat on both mainstream and social media. Might citizens’ assemblies not have these failings?

There are many virtue of citizens’ assemblies as a quasi-direct form of democracy – like being like an informed gathering of lay jurors - but there are still issues to be resolved over whether the method of selection is genuinely random, what happens if they still result in polarisation of opinion as a result of reflecting what is going on outside their confines, and what obligation – legal or moral - governments have act upon the outcome of their deliberations. And, there is the danger, like with referenda, that government set them up, determining their business, to suit their ends. On citizens’ assemblies, we did repeatedly ask both Gordon Brown and Nicola Sturgeon to make their case for citizens’ assemblies for this issue of Scottish Left Review but neither even responded, let alone declined.

There are also other methods we should consider as aids to extending and deepening democracy. Among these are allowing recall petitions to replace MPs (and MSPs, councillors etc as well) on the basis on more than just criminal convictions, and primaries – as in the United States - to widen the franchise for the selection of candidates for political office. Of course, these means in themselves would not prevent the new ‘alt-right’ and populist right subversion of democracy where they pose as defenders of democracy. That requires a political strategy based upon progressive political ideologies.
Democracy is on-going and never finished

Willie Sullivan, Jess Garland and Michela Palese on how to fix our broken political system

Most commentators seem to buy in to the idea that we are largely governed by consent in Britain. Up until now, it has seemed to matter only a little that this consent is positively granted through the clumsy and cumbersome method of winner takes all elections held around every five years. This is probably because we trusted our institutions, the rule of law, the operation of parliament, the freedom of the press, the impartiality of public service broadcasting and the idea that those that who governed us shared or represented our interests.

The neo-liberal project both captured and then degraded democratic cultures. In the whirl of late twentieth century capitalism, it was hard to find our bearings - even when we saw undemocratic interests begin to infiltrate and manipulate our institutions such as the finance sector and property development lobbies. We let it go as we seemed to share their interests: banks got richer, we all get richer; houses prices keep going up, lots of us felt more secure. This, of course, was partly true but mostly an illusion. The crash of 2008 and a social revolution driven by technology have created a paradigm shift that means that story of a shared stake in economic growth has been exposed as a historical Ponzi scheme. It’s sad to say that we have, inadvertently, conspired in a massive fraud against our own children. The more recent Brexit paralysis in parliament is a symptom, not a cause, of our political crisis. It can be argued that the call for Scottish independence is an older symptom of the same problem.

The economics of these issues can be discussed elsewhere. We are interested here in unpacking and understanding the growing failure of our democracy to represent our interests and particularly the interests of future generations. And, if it has failed to do this most fundamental of tasks, then what must we do to make sure that we find new systems and institutions that can do the job better? We can look back and say the British state and structures of class hierarchy and patriarchy have always been about privilege and oppressed people here and overseas. This is true, but the big difference now is that many more people can see it and care about it, whether through a sense of injustice or because they feel humiliated and angry as they look in the mirror and see their own alienation reflected back.

This raises the question of legitimacy, which is the key to being governed by consent. We have to believe and to trust that the state is largely operating in our interests by whatever mechanism. Otherwise, put crudely, we will need to un-elect some of its heads if it doesn’t. Elections alone are a clunky manner in which to transfer power from the people to our governors and while deeply insufficient they are also the essential base on which everything else rests. They are not only the trapdoor on which any would be leaders stand; they are the banner behind which we march in our history and shared story of democracy. The fight for the franchise was so important that it needs to hold that place. Let’s hope that in the future that, as participative and deliberative methods become embedded in the way we run ourselves, people will have many more and much richer experiences of democratic actions. Even with those methods in place, however, the act of voting will remain the point at which people feel they are flexing the larger muscles of democratic power. This means that the ballot box needs to be reclaimed.

Our society stood at a fork in the road in the 1980s and 1990s and rushed towards the banks, competition and conspicuous consumption, conspiring in the defeat of the National Union of Miners, the wider movement and the repurposing of the Labour Party. The road splits again now and it splits around the dual meaning of representation. Do we need advocates, educated in particular ways and, at the extreme, bred to rule? Or do we want people ‘like us’, the many different ‘us’ that there are? In looking at the rise of populism, it might be important to understand the need some people have for ‘false fathers’ in a scary world were the ‘hard men’ are affirming their power by frightening us. Just as it is also important to understand what is the counter to that - a politics of transformation, where collectively we need to grow up, to look after ourselves and each other, to see that the only real threat are the ‘hard men’ and what they do to our capacity to care well for each and for the very place we exist.

Democracy in most people minds begins with elections but elections are meaningless without other legitimate institutions. The only states in the world that don’t claim to be democratic are Saudi Arabia and the Vatican and their rulers claim their legitimacy directly from god. Interestingly, North Korea holds regular elections, showing it is easier to hold down a population when there is even a sliver of legitimacy.

Our problem here is that not enough people now believe in the legitimacy of the British state. If our objective was to restore an autocratic monarchy, then our task would be to revive belief in the divine rights of kings (and maybe queens). As our aim is to restore and remake democracy fit for the
twenty first century, our task is to revive a belief not only in voting but in the idea that government of the people, by the people, for the people, is really possible.

Britain’s broken Westminster system, so easily co-opted to the interests of the few, lies at the root of many of the problems highlighted above. The Brexit vote could be Britain’s long-awaited constitutional moment, serving as the impetus for thorough review and reform of our constitutional structures. It may well be far too late to save the Union, but who would want to save it in this current form anyway? If anything credible is to be offered to people in Scotland and to all the peoples of Britain, it can be nothing less than a complete transformation. To dictate what might be at the end of such a journey would be anti-democratic, but the Electoral Reform Society has been thinking about what the first few miles of this journey might look like. Political reform will require a top down and a bottom up approach where we i) need to see leadership from the top acting to break the dysfunctional, executive-dominated Westminster model, which has remained unreformed for so long; but we also need to ii) bring politics closer to people, to engage and to give meaning to political participation.

Constitutional reform has occurred outside Westminster, but the centre remains largely unchanged from its original model. This has led to:

- **Executive dominance:** the system underpinning our politics hands almost unrestrained power to the leader of the government, however few citizens voted for it. When it comes to the distribution of power in the Westminster system, the possibility of ‘elected dictatorship’ is not far away. The Brexit process has so far been, for the most part, an exercise in executive power and constitutional flexibility. It has already exposed the British state’s hyper-centralising and power-hoarding tendencies.

- **An unrepresentative and weak second chamber:** the House of Lords starts from a place of maintaining class-based hierarchy rather than enfranchisement. No amount of tweaking its size can cover for the fact that it fails on almost all democratic principles. Its reform has been on the political agenda for over 100 years and engagement with this issue has been long-standing and cross-partisan. Twenty years on from the *House of Lords Act* 1999, reforming the House of Lords remains firmly unfinished business. In the past 20 years, there have been around nine attempts at reforming the House of Lords, if we only consider white papers, commissions, Bills and Acts. Since the most recent attempt at large-scale reform, the *House of Lords Reform Bill*, was withdrawn in 2012, Britain has been through unprecedented constitutional change making reform even more pressing.

- **Lack of voice for Britain’s nations and localities:** the current mechanisms for cross-border working in Britain do not appear to be working as well as they could. While there have been more formal and regular meetings of ministers from Britain’s constituent parts since the EU referendum, the devolved governments have had little influence in shaping the British government’s Brexit position and have been effectively excluded from EU negotiations. England lacks any distinct representation in these cross-border forums, with Westminster government, parliament and ministers expected to take on a ‘dual hat’ role, representing both Britain as a whole and England.

Reforming our second chamber can improve the health of our democracy by allowing for the fair and equal representation of Britain’s nations and localities, particularly in this post-Brexit era. A second chamber elected on a territorial basis could serve as a forum in which the four nations (including English localities, depending on how they choose to be represented at the national level) can work together in the twenty first century.

An elected second chamber could be the place where Britain-wide, sub-national, and cross-border issues are discussed, where sub-national interests and concerns can be raised and given a fair hearing away from the more politicised and short-term ethos of the House of Commons. Key considerations for reforming the second chamber are: i) composition of the chamber; ii) election of members; iii) specific powers over territorial issues; iv) relationship with the House of Commons; and v) further devolution to the nations and localities of the UK – including to and within England.

Politics has become increasingly distant – institutions do not reflect identities and political choices and the majority of Britain has not had a say in its constitutional future. This has led to:

- **Disengagement:** our research shows that almost half (47%) of people do not feel at all or very represented by parties at Westminster and that two-thirds (67%) feel like they have no or very few opportunities to inform and influence decisions made by their elected representatives. Recent polls also show a historically low combined vote share – around 50% or less – for the Conservatives and Labour, which indicates that voters are not only less closely aligned with the two ‘main’ parties, but also wish to support a wider
range of parties. This year’s Audit of Political Engagement found 47% of people feel they have no influence at all over national decision-making – a high for the Audit series.

- **Political polarisation and geographical inequality:** the dominance of two-party politics has excluded a range of voices from political discussion, pushing locality-specific concerns to the margins as parties chase their national median voter. England in particular remains highly centralised and is still primarily ruled through Britain-wide institutions – it is the ‘gaping hole in the devolution settlement’. So far, devolution within England has been a top-down project. Within England, citizens have not had a chance to discuss their constitutional future or to consider whether an institutional change might be desirable.

Fundamental constitutional change and a recalibration of how we practise our democracy cannot be imposed from Westminster. Bottom-up citizen involvement is necessary to ensure the legitimacy of, and trust in, our institutional set-up, new governing arrangements, and democracy more broadly. This will require a shift in culture which views citizens and local government and councillors as co-creators of policy and collaborators in shaping the future of the country. Thus, people can and should be given the power to shape the future of politics in a more active and consistent way. This would take two primary forms:

- People should be involved in shaping the big constitutional questions of our time, supplementing the piecemeal and incremental work that has so far been undertaken, primarily – if not solely – by politicians. An English constitutional convention should be established to address devolution to and within England. A Britain-wide constitutional convention should also be set up to consider the democratic future of the union in a holistic manner. The work of the other sub-national conventions and assemblies could feed into the Britain-wide convention, which would then focus on the broader constitutional questions such as the relationship between the constituent parts of Britain.

- People should be involved in politics throughout the decision-making process, not just at election time. Multiple entry points for democratic participation should be created at different levels to address local policy issues.

To save our democracy, we need to reform it. We need to give our second chamber legitimacy to do its job, we need to create a political culture that contains the full range of political tools – including those of negotiation and compromise – and we need to find a space to bring together our nations in their shared interests, rather than allow the centre to dominate and override.

We must deal with the toxic polarisation of our politics by building mechanisms to bring people together to hear each other’s views as well as expressing their own and we have to create opportunities for citizens to influence politics, both at the national level and closer to home, giving people a voice in shaping the future of their communities.

Reform needs to be both top-down and bottom-up. It is essential that citizens are brought into the debate about their constitutional future, but this will only have meaning if there is a commitment at the top to change – a bold vision of a new democracy which breaks with the past power-hoarding of the centre and paves the way for a fresh new way of doing politics that Britain can be proud of. Our five key recommendations are:

1. **Britain should shift away from the centralised ‘Westminster model’ of governance, towards a consensus model.** People can and should be given the power to shape the future of politics in a more active and consistent way so the public should be involved in shaping the big constitutional questions of our time and the public should be involved in politics throughout the decision-making process, not just at election time.

2. **The next government must reform the House of Lords as a priority.** No more reviews: it is time for manifest action.

3. **An elected second chamber must serve as the forum in which the four nations – and England’s localities – can work together.** This reformed chamber would be where Britain-wide, sub-national, and cross-border issues are discussed.

4. **An English Constitutional Convention – led by citizens – should consider devolution within England, building upon the work of local citizens’ assemblies and other deliberative democratic processes to give people a say on how they are represented.**

5. **Citizens’ assemblies should be used at the local level in a systematic and embedded manner to deal with complex and contested issues.**

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Scottish Parliament: essential to Scottish democracy but what kind of democracy?

Paul Cairney argues the Scottish Parliament is fundamental to Scottish democracy but legitimises pluralist rather than participatory democracy

A well-functioning and effective parliamentary system underpins a well-functioning democratic system. However, there is no point in pretending that a single body can foster every kind of democracy. Instead, we make choices about the type of democracy we would like to see. More realistically still, we need to reflect on the type of system that already exists, why it endures, and if there is a realistic chance of reforming it. To my mind, Scottish devolution reinforced representative and pluralist forms of democracy, with minimal scope for more participatory or deliberative innovations. Further, the Scottish Parliament represents a profoundly important legitimising role even though, in practice, its members cannot pay attention to more than a tiny proportion of government decisions made ostensibly with its blessing. Here, I use this framework to provide context for future debates on parliamentary and democratic reforms.

From the establishment of Scottish devolution, a key problem with the idea of a Scottish Parliament has been that it represents all things to all people without a clear sense of the trade-offs or tensions between different aims. New Scottish Parliament elections foster representative democracy and the hope for a more representative body of MSPs. A petitions process, and experimentation with a civic forum and mini-publics, fosters participatory and deliberative democracy. New styles of consultation and cooperation with policy participants, such as interest or third sector groups, foster pluralist democracy. Yet, these activities do not simply come together to produce a marvellous harmony of voices. Rather, democracy is frequently – if not primarily - about people competing to be heard at the others’ expense. Or, one forum competes with another to represent the main hub for democratic expression.

For me, the main tension is between two very different models. The first was summed up by the vague phrase, ‘new politics’. The Scottish Parliament would foster participation by coordinating a petitions process, sponsoring the Scottish Civic Forum (SCF) and, perhaps, experimenting with initiatives - such as mini-publics and citizen juries - to explore the extent to which the deliberations of a small group of people could inform wider public and parliamentary debate.

Neil Mcgarvey and I devoted a whole chapter to such topics in the first edition of our Scottish Politics: An Introduction (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008). We wrote largely about the gaps between some people’s expectations and actual practices. The SCF closed after receiving minimal Scottish Parliament and Scottish Government support (and interest groups preferred to approach those bodies directly). The petitions process encouraged self-selecting participation – and the chance for small groups of people to set the agenda of a committee for a brief period - but offered little hope for influencing government policy. Further, almost no other initiatives got off the ground. In the second edition of our Scottish Politics: An Introduction in 2013, we removed this chapter altogether, simply because there was nothing new to say. The idea of democratic innovations had a new lease of life when the Commission on Parliamentary Reform (https://parliamentaryreform.scot/) recommended their greater use, but we should manage our expectations based on the Scottish experience to date.

The second model was a much more traditional and enduring form of representative democracy coupled with the assumption that the government would govern. In this model, the Scottish Parliament plays two profoundly important roles. First, it provides a forum for representation. In particular, there were explicitly high – and partly fulfilled - hopes that the Scottish Parliament would be more representative of women, coupled with far vaguer and unfulfilled hopes for representation according to race or ethnicity, class, age, and disability. Second, it legitimises Scottish Government policy. To all intents and purposes, it delegates policymaking responsibility to the Scottish Government then holds ministers to account for the ways in which they carry that responsibility. In many cases, the policy is humdrum and routine, with little partisan competition or committee interest. In some, the policy is high salience, with party competition infusing committee attention.

Focusing on the second model allows us to highlight the ways, and extent, to which the Scottish Parliament matters. Consider two descriptions that appear to highlight minimal versus maximal importance. The first is the classic ‘policy communities’ description of pluralist democracy, inspired by Grant Jordan and Jeremy Richardson’s highly provocative description of a policy process in a post-parliamentary democracy in their 1979 book, Governing under pressure. In many ways, this description highlights the limited role of Parliament by describing the limited role of ministers:

- The size and scope of the state is so large that it is always in danger of becoming unmanageable. There is a highly crowded policy-making environment, in which huge numbers of actors seek policy influence. Consequently, ministers manage complexity by breaking
the state’s component parts into policy sectors and sub-sectors, with power spread across many parts of government.

- Elected policymakers can only pay attention to a tiny proportion of issues for which they are responsible. So, they pay attention to a small number and ignore the rest. In effect, they delegate policymaking responsibility to other actors such as civil servants, often at low levels of government.

- At this level of government and specialisation, civil servants rely on specialist organisations for information and advice. Those organisations trade that information/advice and other resources for access to, and influence within, the government.

- Most public policy is conducted primarily through small and specialist policy communities that process issues at a level of government not particularly visible to the public, and with minimal senior policymaker involvement.

This description of ‘policy communities’ suggests that senior elected politicians are less important than people think, their impact on policy is questionable, and elections and changes of government may not provide the changes in policy that many expect.

Further, it calls into question the importance of MSPs questioning ministers in plenary and committee: they will receive often-minimal information about a small proportion of government business. This description reinforces practical concerns about the feasibility of parliamentary scrutiny. Scottish Parliament committees have limited resources to scrutinise policy and question ministers effectively; they rarely engage in meaningful or direct contact with civil servants; they struggle to gather information on the work of public bodies; and, local authorities generally argue that they are accountable to their electorates, not Parliament. Periods of coalition majority (1999-2007), minority (2007-11; 2016-) and single party majority (2011-6) government have reinforced this image of a peripheral-looking body. The Scottish Parliament is a powerful body at the heart of accountability on paper, but not in practice.

The second description comes from another classic study, namely, David Judge’s *The Parliamentary State* from 1993. In it, he argues that the importance of Parliament is not found in the observance of its ‘powers’ as such, but rather in the examination of, ‘the very process of representation and the legitimation of governmental outputs flowing from that process’. Any exercise of power by a government is dependent upon Parliament granting its consent and legitimacy. Otherwise, policy communities would suffer from a legitimation gap and would be unable to operate to describe their outputs as ‘authoritative’ or ‘binding’. Thus, for example, government bill teams take great care to anticipate parliamentary reaction, and produce draft legislation accordingly. If so, parliamentary influence exists in the minds and practices of ministers and civil servants, and is not as visible as, say, First Minister’s Questions.

For me, these arguments essentially represent two sides of the same coin. On one side is intense parliamentary activity that matters. In some cases, MSPs become engaged intensely in plenary and committee discussions, and ministers and civil servants build their expectation of this response into their policy design. Meantime, on the other side is the logical consequence to this activity: if MSPs are paying attention to those issues, they have to ignore the rest. The scope of state intervention in our lives, and size of the public sector, is immense, and the Scottish Parliament only has the ability to pay attention to a tiny proportion of that activity. The anticipated reactions argument can only take us so far when there is so much policy activity that is legitimised by the Scottish Parliament without their awareness.

These insights should inform debates on how we might reform the Scottish Parliament. In this context, other recommendations by the Commission on Parliamentary Reform seem more relevant to Scottish democracy. Discussions of participatory and deliberative democracy are interesting, but they describe a tiny proportion of government business. Rather, representative and pluralist democracy is where the action is. So, some of its recommendations describe the prospect of a more organised process for scrutiny of ministers. However, other recommendations recognise the need to enhance meaningful relationships with other parts of the policy process, including local government and government agencies. This latter suggestion is crucial to the ways in which Scottish Government has changed over the last decade, in terms of setting out a broad strategy and inviting a large number of public bodies to carry it out, often aided by long-term outcomes measures rather than the kinds of short-term targets more conducive to straightforward parliamentary scrutiny. The Scottish Government makes these reforms partly via the choice to share power across the public sector, and partly because it lacks the capacity to control, coordinate, or even understand most of the decisions made in its name. The ‘policy communities’ argument now extends to the public sector as a whole, rather than central government departments.

If so, the most important democratic reform would be to shift parliamentary attention (somewhat) from high salience set piece debates towards the more routine and humdrum monitoring of the public sector as a whole. This would be in keeping with the acknowledgement that most decisions made in the name of Scottish ministers, and legitimised by the Scottish Parliament, take place despite minimal ministerial and parliamentary attention.

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Benefitting from the Brexit benefit of broken Britain

Tommy Sheppard argues only an independent Scotland can be the crucible for citizens’ control

Democracy means the right to change your mind. Collectively, people can decide to do something, and if it doesn’t work, or they don’t like it, they can do something else. That much shouldn’t be in doubt for the left – or any democrat. There’s no argument in principle against having a second referendum – on anything – if that is what people want. Then again, you can’t go changing your mind every week, or even year, or nothing would ever be settled. So, when is it right to have a second vote?

I’d argue three things need to be considered. First, has the information on which the first decision was based changed or proven to be have been wrong? Second, have opinions changed – at least enough to suggest a different result? Finally, is the legislature charged with implementing the decision unwilling, or unable, to do so? Any one of these factors might of itself be justification to have a second vote on something, but when all three of these conditions are met the case is unanswerable. This is why Britain should have another vote on Brexit. The information that people were given in 2016 was flawed to put it mildly. Opinion has clearly changed - by more than a 10% margin. And parliament – well, I rest my case. Only a people’s vote has any hope of resolving the current political crisis in Britain.

These same principles can inform our judgment about whether, and when, to have a second referendum on independence too. For sure, two out of three conditions are met. The information on which people voted in 2014 has changed dramatically. Not just the actuality of Brexit but the way in which it has been executed has exposed the true relationship of Scotland within Britain. Remember ‘lead not leave’ [Britain] anyone? So much for the promise of Scottish views being respected.

It’s also clear there’s a huge disjuncture between the decision in the referendum in 2014 and the views of the parliament people elected just two years later. To say the Scottish parliament is unwilling to regard the referendum as having settled the matter is something of an understatement given a majority of its members are committed to having another one. So that leaves public opinion. Has there been a decisive shift in how people would vote? In truth, not yet. Nine out of ten opinion polls since the last referendum put the ‘yes’ vote at the same as it was or very slightly higher. The needle has seemed stuck in the mid-forties for a long time. But these net figures mask a churn in opinion, caused principally by the fallout of Brexit. Five to ten percent of the electorate say that what has happened with Brexit means they would now support independence. And pretty much the same number now say they will no longer support independence because of the pro EU stance of the SNP and ‘yes’ supporters.

But when we get to a second indyref, Brexit won’t be on the ballot. The choice will simply be whether people in Scotland should have control over their own affairs, including whether to be in the EU and on what terms. If that case is made clearly even the most ardent independence supporting Brexiter could be persuaded. Moreover, for many people their current decision to say ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to Scotland’s independence is nuanced and very much conditional on what happens next. When pollsters ask whether people would prefer independence to being part of Brexit for Britain, suddenly there’s a majority for the former. And it seems the harder the Brexit, the larger the majority for independence.

It is in this context that we need to understand the decision by the SNP to ratchet up the plans for a further independence referendum. We are, of course, still in the throes of Brexit and we do not know for sure what the outcome will be. But it is beginning to feel that we are now in the endgame. You have to plan on what you know, not what you hope for. And we know, for sure, that unless Westminster policy is changed, we will leave the EU at Halloween. Even if parliament votes against leaving without a deal, it will happen unless the whole process is revoked.

As things stand now a no-deal Brexit is the most likely outcome. It may not happen and, of course, we will fight against it but you don’t wait until the worst happens before planning for it. That’s why legislation is being introduced in the Scottish parliament to allow people in Scotland to say if they want to take control of their own affairs or stay in the Brexit Britain of Boris. Now, it’s a statement of the obvious that things might happen in the next six months that will force a recalibration of the timetable. A second Brexit referendum or a general election could produce a result that would require a tactical rethink. This, by the way, doesn’t necessarily mean a delay – indeed, there are potential election outcomes that might suggest an acceleration of plans to hold the next indyref. It is, though, more likely than not that Scotland will get the chance to vote again on becoming an independent country before the end of 2020. I confess that is sooner than I would have expected a few years ago. But then no one could fully appreciate the shitshow that Brexit has turned into and the way it has redefined Britain. So, the next twelve months will be a time for building the case for independence.

A lot of that will be about policy. Pro-independence supporters have, for instance, been aiming to fill the void of economic and fiscal policy that was cruelly exposed last time round. Indeed, the SNP’s economic policies have been the subject of critical debate in this journal (see July/August 2018, issue 106). Despite concerns on the left, it looks as if the economic case for independence this time round will look much more like a traditional social democratic mixed economy model than the pro-business prospectus of the 2013 White Paper. Frankly though, as I argued in the aforementioned issue of this journal, none of this is a priority. Of course, it is important to prove in general terms that Scotland could afford to be independent and illustrate how it could be based on a fairer economy. But in truth the main point of independence is that people get the government they vote for. An independent Scotland could pursue low tax, low investment policies
– or the reverse. So, the time when these arguments really matter is when parties are preparing their manifestoes for the first election to an independent Scottish parliament.

It is because I believe we can build majority support for the case for a more equal, fair and publicly accountable society that I argue for political independence in Scotland. It offers a better means for radical social and economic change than remaining in the outdated polity of Britain. But unless and until people achieve that political power the rest is just wishful thinking. So, it is important to galvanise progressive forces around the demand for independent control of our own affairs in Scotland. That means there are more important debates to be had now before we construct the policy manual for a new country. These are debates about political philosophy and strategy and they involve attending to some unfinished business from last time round.

The first of these concerns the nature of contemporary Scottish nationalism. In the sense that I believe Scotland should be a nation state, I am a nationalist. But I am also a socialist, an internationalist, a democrat, a republican and many other things besides. Those who oppose Scottish independence have for decades dishonestly caricatured those who espouse it. They have tried to associate the term nationalist with its most negative and repulsive variants, subtly implying that even if we don’t advocate authoritarian xenophobia that’s the inevitable trajectory should we vote for control over our own affairs. This is nonsense. Most opponents of independence don’t argue against nation states they just argue that Scotland should be part of the British nation state rather than one by itself.

Scottish nationalism is an inclusive civic movement led by people who want open borders and more immigration. It is a progressive force for change to a more equal and diverse society. It is built on looking to the future not dwelling in the past.

We need to address some of the nonsense critiques of Scotland being an independent nation state head on. Let’s start with separation. Our opponents pretend that having political control over our own affairs will isolate Scotland, and they portray independence as a barrier keeping us apart from others.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Scotland isn’t going anywhere. We will still occupy the northern part of the British Isles as an independent country. The difference is our voice will be heard and we will be in control of how we work with others. Political independence is not only a means to empower people to have more control over their own lives, it will also allow them to be better represented in Britain, Europe and the world. It is a means of engagement and not isolation. It is also a means by which we can express our solidarity with people elsewhere in Britain and beyond. Independence offers the left the opportunity to implement radical policies at home and project them on a wider platform to the rest of Britain. It can be the catalyst and the roadmap for change well beyond Scotland. It is also a way in which the people of Scotland can exercise practical international solidarity by pursuing policies as an independent state.

The unionist argument goes on to ask why should we want a hard border with England. We don’t – and we wouldn’t need to if both countries were members of the EU trading bloc. It is Brexit that forces a hard border, not independence. If Britain goes through with Brexit then the border with a future independent Scotland would also be a border with the EU. Even if we can’t stop it, we can work out a way to make sure there’s no hard border at Carlisle. It is in both Scotland and England’s interests to make this as permeable as possible and any discussion an independent Scotland has about its relationship with the EU will have to include getting the latter’s support for special relationship with England and Wales. It is worth noting though that even the hardest of Brexiters claim that it can be achieved without a hard border on Ireland – so one wonders why that couldn’t also be the case in Scotland.

We are then asked why anyone would want to leave Britain but stay in the EU. This question is glibly posed by unionists – particularly those of the liberal democrat or right wing Labour persuasion – in a way which suggests they have exposed a fatal inconsistency in the independence argument. But again, this is nonsense and the question put has a quite simple answer. They are two completely different things. The EU is a confederation of independent sovereign states which have decided to come together to do things they cannot get done by themselves. Britain is a single state where the interests and aspirations of four countries are fused in a single polity and all power resides at Westminster. To suggest that just because they share the word ‘union’, the EU and Britain are similar political structures is willful misrepresentation at best, crass ignorance at worst.

Comparing the way in which the largest EU countries have supported Ireland in the current Brexit debate with the way Westminster has ignored Scotland has been instructive for many people.

Independence means being in charge of our own affairs, not going it alone. Independence allows us to make alliances, treaties, even unions, with other countries. But on terms we agree on and with the power to change those structures should we wish it. A second independence referendum is coming. Maybe next year. Possibly a few years after that. But soon. In getting there, we will not put down our fellow citizens who take a contrary view but engage them in the debate. This will be formalized at a national level through a Citizens Assembly and replicated locally by ‘yes’ groups across the land. The context will be different. The prospectus will be different. But the central question remains the same.

And when the question is put it will be about whether we have the right to choose how to organise our society and use our resources. The ‘Better Together’ campaign promised last time round that devolution within Britain offered Scotland that control within the security and influence of Britain. Neither of these claims survive cursory inspection. From Brexit to climate change, our power is non-existent or severely constrained. And far from offering a comfort blanket, a post-Brexit British state is looking like a very insecure and dangerous place to be.

Tommy Sheppard is the (SNP) MP for Edinburgh East

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**Editor's Note**: This page appears to have been accidentally included in the document. It is not relevant to the content discussing Scottish independence. The focus of the text on the previous page is on the importance of independence and the challenges it presents, rather than any technical issue with democracy. The error does not impact the main argument or content of the document.
The hard-right today: Fascists and non-fascists

Neil Davidson says knowing fascists from hard right populists is essential in fighting them both

The left always risks making two errors when faced with a threat from forces on the hard-right. One, most disastrously realised in Germany during the 1930s, is complacency, ignoring or at least downplaying the genuine threat of fascism. The other, far more common today, involves misrecognition, or even deliberate misrepresentation, by extending the term ‘fascist’ to other right-wing movements which, however odious they may be, have different objectives and deploy different methods. Golden Dawn in Greece is a classic fascist formation in a way that the Northern League in Italy is not. Stephen Yaxley-Lennon (aka ‘Tommy Robinson’) is a fascist, but Nigel Farage is not and neither is Donald Trump and the latter two are currently more dangerous than the former.

Establishing the distinction between the fascist and non-fascist hard-right inevitably involves ‘ideal types’. In the real world, of course, these blur and overlap at the edges, but the distinctions are nevertheless necessary, not to indulge in academic hair-splitting over definitions, but because it determines the different tactics which need to be deployed by the left if it to successfully oppose them both, above all in relation to the use of physical force.

The hard-right always occupies a spectrum of positions, but all points on this continuum tend to share two main characteristics. One is a primary social base of membership and support in one or more fractions of the middle-class, above all the self-employed petty bourgeoisie, but also among traditional middle-class professionals and the technical-managerial new middle class. The other is an ideology of extreme nationalism, in which the nation is usually under double threat from above and inside by treacherous elites and from below and outside by disruptive external intruders.

There are, nevertheless, three main differences between the respective methods and goals associated with actual fascists and their non-fascist cousins.

First, is their attitude to the working class. One defining characteristic of fascist movements is to seek the destruction of working class organizations; this not the case with other sections of the hard-right. Indeed, after the Argentinian coup of 1943, the Peronists found that they had to rely on unions in order for the regime to survive. This is why not only Peronism, but a movement like Ulster Loyalism, based as it was on the skilled Protestant working class, is not fascist, however reactionary and divisive as it may otherwise be.

Second, is that, while fascists may stand for election, they primarily rely on paramilitary organization and violence to attain power. The two main fascist regimes, the Italian and German, installed themselves through a combination of paramilitary violence and elections, but it was success of the former that gave credibility to the latter. Once in power, of course, fascists will dispense with, not only elections, but every manifestation of democracy and every institution which might challenge their power – which is why unions and worker’s parties cannot be permitted to exist in the fascist state.

This one of the reasons why fascism is the last, rather than the first resort for any capitalist ruling class; in addition to being inherently disruptive and unstable, it removes the mechanism for changing regimes without recourse to civil war or invasion. The non-fascist hard-right are, however, primarily electoral and seek to attain office through the normal working of bourgeois democracy at local, national and European levels. If defeated in 2020, Trump almost certainly will claim electoral fraud, but will not attempt to cling to power through a coup.

One might then say that fascism is revolutionary and the non-fascist hard-right is reformist; but what do these terms mean in this context? Many Marxists are reluctant to use the term ‘revolution’ in relation to any modern political movement not of the left, with the possible exception of nationalisms in the Global South. But if we consider fascist seizures of power as political revolutions – in other words as those actions which change the nature and personnel of the political regime without changing the mode of production – then there is no reason why the term should not be applicable to them. Revolution and reform do not involve different roads to the same place but – as in Rosa Luxemburg’s formulation concerning the left–different destinations.

This leads to the third major difference. Fascism is not defined simply by its recourse to extra-parliamentary or illegal activity, but by their purpose: a project of transformation which seeks the creation of a ‘new’ society, the final realisation of a national destiny which had hitherto been denied. But to achieve this the people – inevitably conceived in racial terms – themselves must be purified, must prove themselves worthy of the world which the fascists hope to bring into being. Fascism is never uncomplicatedly the ‘tool of monopoly capitalism’: it is rather that the goals of fascism overlap at certain points with that of capital, notably in the crushing of a perceived working-class threat and pursuance of imperialist goals. But the Holocaust was not ‘necessary’ for German capitalism; rather, it was fatal for Jewish members of the capitalist class and diverted resources which could have been deployed in fighting the Allies. The non-fascist hard-right, however, insists that the people are already the repository of homogeneity and virtue, but that these qualities are under threat. This is a project of restoration: ‘Make America Great.
Since one of the founding tenets of mass manifestations – unsurprisingly, demonstrations, marches or other events – is the desire to mobilise their supporters for some cause, the significance of this shift has been to question whether contemporary right-wing populists have no such inhibitions. What this means is that right-wing populism engage in forms of political activity which were once the preserve of the left or the fascist right. It is also the case that fascists have started to practice ‘entryism’ into the populist hard right parties, although usually at an individual rather than at an organisational level. But on social media particularly, this can give the impression that, say, UKIP is ‘really’ fascist because of tweets by members who are also in the BNP.

The other development has occurred on the fascist wing of the hard-right and is a new emphasis on democracy. Previously, fascists have argued that democracy is an impediment to the pure expression of the people’s will to which their party or leader has direct access, and no doubt if installed in power contemporary fascists would also attempt to suppress democracy. In Britain in particular, however, ‘elite’ attempts to negate or minimise the EU referendum result have enabled fascists like Yaxley-Lennon and non-fascist right-wingers like Farage to both claim that they are upholding democratic outcomes ignored by a corrupt establishment.

Nevertheless, important new differences have also opened up between sections of the hard-right. The non-fascist wing have been prepared to abandon or at least down play formerly reactionary positions in relation to gender and sexual orientation – although even this is linked to ethno-cultural racism, particularly in its Islamophobic form: hard-right politicians in the Netherlands, for example, rhetorically invoked the relative freedoms of women or gays in the West as a way of denouncing the supposedly oppressive beliefs of Muslims. This is not a reason which fascists are likely to give for opposing Islam.

All variants of the hard-right obviously have to be fought, but it is important to retain a sense of perspective: at the moment the right-wing populism is the more immediate danger, if only because it is proving to be the most successful. But opposing it also involves understanding why it exists. The conditions for the emergence of the populist hard-right were set forty years of neo-liberalism, compounded by the more recent imposition of brutal austerity regimes, to which the populists provide false solutions. The social neo-liberals responsible for much of this since the 1990s – Blair and Brown, the Clintons and Obama, the post-Maastricht EU and so on – exist in a symbiotic relationship with the populist hard-right. In other words, the latter cannot be fought by simply returning to the policies of the former. That will simply lead to further disillusion with politics, leading to a situation in which actual fascism may appear to be an answer.

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Can populism ever be principled?

George Kerevan traces the roots of populism to discern its progressive potential

How do we build a realistic alternative to Bilo, Farage, Trump et al.? Let’s start by demystifying the term ‘populism’. It was first coined in the early 1890s in reference to the US Populist Party, formed to defend poor farmers against big business and the Republican and Democrat duopoly. At this point, farming families composed a third of the US population. Prompted by the 1893 economic crash, the separate political mobilisation of this group took a radical turn with demands for public control over the railways and banks. The Populists captured governorships in nine states. But its underlying political weakness was exposed in the 1896 presidential election, when it gave away its independence by endorsing William Jennings Bryan, a left-wing Democrat and borderline demagogue. America’s poor farmers (like peasant movements everywhere) were too ideologically fragmented and lacking in economic leverage to challenge the capitalist system by themselves. They needed allies. But instead of cementing a strategic, anti-system pact with the urban working class, the Populists opted to ally with the existing Democratic political machine – behind which hid the racist, Southern landed oligarchy.

This catastrophic mistake was facilitated by the Populist inadequate programme. This was cast in crude terms of ‘us against the elite’, with no clear plan to dismantle the rule of finance capital and replace it with something else. At its most ideological, US Populists espoused a classless Jeffersonian utopia that was already redundant in an era where US imperialism was stealing Cuba and the Philippines from Spain. The Achilles Heel of ‘progressive’ populism is its propensity to fudge class divisions, in a vain hope of uniting ‘all the people’ against a vaguely defined ‘elite’.

During the twentieth century, progressive populism came to describe any radical, inter-class alliance consisting of (mainly) peasants, urban liberal intellectuals and workers, the latter usually in the minority. This model of populism was dominant in dependent capitalist countries, particularly in Latin America. Save Cuba, such revolutionary populist struggles proved abortive because they were ideologically confused and, therefore, open to opportunism.

This is not to decry the strategic need for class alliances between workers, farmers and intermediate social layers (e.g. students, technicians, pensioners) for such an alliance is central, not just to defeating right-wing, populist reaction, but to winning a parliamentary majority and installing an anti-system government in the first place. But the lesson of original, progressive populism is you cannot defeat the right with some vague project based on the lowest common denominator of demands. As seen in every multi-class rising – from 1848 against Absolutism to the 1930s’ Popular Fronts against fascism – you cannot stop half-way with a ‘reformed’ capitalism without strangling the progressive movement itself.

In recent decades, progressive populism has developed new forms, by seeking to identify a stronger ideological bond to hold the multi-class social ensemble together. Chávez’s Bolivarianism reinvented populism by branding it with a new, proto-nationalist identity – reinforced by mobilising indigenous peasant people on an ethnic as well as class basis. In this new ideological prism, indigenous peasants and urban poor were united as the dispossessed of a mythical Bolivarian state.

In similar vein, contemporary Scotland and Catalonia have seen the rise of a progressive nationalism that blends a (mild) social democracy with a re-invented national identity based on opposition to metropolitan-imposed austerity. While the Scottish and Catalan movements are tagged as ‘civic’ nationalisms, it is just as plausible to categorise them as a variant of multi-class, progressive populism. In Scotland, the preponderant social weight of the urban working class in this popular alliance has driven the SNP leftwards from its petty bourgeois roots.

Such modern progressive populisms have proved more capable of sustaining multi-class support and so winning greater degrees of power than before. This is due not just to promoting national identity as a unifying factor, but to prioritising the explicit democratic demands that follow on from this. In Latin America, it meant defending the rights of indigenous ethnic groups for the first time. In Scotland, it meant demanding a parliament.

But modern progressive populisms also possess inherent weaknesses. They have a tendency to substitute bureaucratic control for popular democracy, when the social revolution encounters problems. In Latin America, the Bolivarian populist movement is in retreat, squeezed externally by US sanctions and internally by botched land redistribution, rampant corruption and drift from participatory democracy into ‘strongman’ leadership.

A similar betrayal of left populism’s democratic pretentions is seen in the transformation of the Podemos movement into a creature of its titular leader, Pablo Iglesias. Here, membership consultation via internet polls has become a tool for Iglesias to rule by plebiscite and exclude alternative ideological platforms. Iglesias’ conscious appeal to vague, catch-all demands was supposed to open the movement to mass appeal. Instead, it resulted in ideological obscurantism and leadership opportunism. Witness Iglesias’ open-ended support for the right-wing ‘socialist’ government of Pedro Sánchez, which led to Podemos losing a third of its vote in this year’s parliamentary election.

Here in Scotland, the SNP government stands on the brink of a new, post-Brexit independence referendum. The party secured 37.7% of the Scottish poll in the 2019 European elections – amazingly the third highest party share anywhere, and comfortably beating both Farage’s Brexit Party (32%) and Salvini’s Italian League (3%). Clearly, the SNP’s left populist-nationalist model still works.

However, the SNP leadership recently pulled out all the stops in a bid to quash a grassroots membership demand for a separate Scottish currency after independence – code for imposing an anti-system control over foreign banks. The leadership’s strident pro-NATO stance has also caused internal murmurings. Independence will bring these divisions to a head. In which case, left populism becomes either a path to a final rupture with capitalism or else an ideological device to defuse any anti-system struggle. Time will tell.

George Kerevan is the National Convenor of the SNP Socialists group and a former SNP MP
SNP EU election success: a case of the emperor’s new clothes?

Kenny MacAskill says behind the apparent advance lie deep-rooted problems of policy and participation

The EU elections were a good result for the SNP but not a great one. For sure winning’s what matters in every electoral contest and it achieved that comfortably which offers profile and momentum. However, this was a poll where it faced virtually no contest with Labour and Tory imploding and the Brexit Party and Lib Dems challenging from a far lower base north of the border.

In many ways, the SNP’s now all dressed up but with nowhere to go. Whilst it’s clarified the party stance on Brexit, it opened-up questions on where it goes on independence. As the new (post-Salmond/Robertson) SNP leadership comes under more general review, questions on direction and policy are also only going to increase.

Setting itself out as the ‘Remainer’ party in the European elections hasn’t caused any major issues internally. As support for Brexit has shrunk in Scotland, so it has within the SNP. Many who used it as a protest vote against Cameron or immigration in 2016 have learned the true cost, as the hard right has been empowered and racism along with other prejudices have been unleashed.

Others who were more ideologically driven, with opposition to the institution of the European Union on issues such as the common fisheries policy, have seen that life outside is not so rosy or that fishing was always discarded by the British rather than being snatched by the Europeans. Perhaps, the only saving grace of Brexit is that it’s exposed where the fault for the demise of the Scottish fishing fleet lay, and allowed for the industry leaders to be shown to be the handful of oligarchs that they really are.

The ‘lend us your vote’ strategy for the EU poll was successful, with some, if not many, supporting SNP who would be opposed to indyref2, let alone independence. That’s no crime as all parties do it to some extent and SNP has done it before, albeit with different calls at previous elections. There’s always time and hope to convert them and voting is habit forming.

But it does raise questions about just what the strategy is for independence, never mind just what the policy narrative is for the party more generally. EU elections do tend to see an increase in the differential turnout between more affluent and poorer parts. That’s understandable given the distance and perceived lack of relevance of the EU. That was heightened by an SNP campaign which focussed on aspects of the EU that would be lost and yet most benefit the better off, rather than wider social and economic consequences. Free movement and issues in academia are of more concern to those at a senior level in the education sector or those that have the means to enjoy regular travel abroad than they are to those already marginalised in Scotland and for whom access to university never mind city breaks to Europe are but a distant dream.

Direct correlations from EU polls to further elections are always hard to make and SNP leadership focus has returned to indyref2. The challenge now is different and votes won in an EU poll cannot be assured. Whilst the legislation now announced may be better than the proverbial poke in the eye with a sharp stick, its most certainly not confirmation of a referendum next year as portrayed by some. It’s simply about being seen to be doing something even though there’s neither required consent from Westminster nor a strategy to get around that impediment. More importantly, the electoral timing with both Westminster and Holyrood elections looming mitigates against much of that.

So, the SNP is now at a crossroads in terms of where’s it going and what’s it for. More than four years into Nicola Sturgeon’s tenure and the constitutional cause is no further advanced and the political narrative has been blurred.

The Growth Commission perhaps best encapsulates her reign. What was required were arguments and options; confirmation that keeping the pound was perfectly credible, suggestions that joining the euro was not the end of life as we know it, and that an independent currency was also perfectly feasible.

Instead a tightly knit group, indicative of Nicola Sturgeon’s closed inner circle, took years to return with a policy position that was hugely unpopular with many and has left the party’s position arguably even less clear than before. Added to that, it was a growth agenda that they’ve done nothing with and yet is now being openly questioned, indeed even arguably superseded, as climate change becomes all too manifest.

The ‘new’ SNP has moved the party’s broadly social democratic position to one of mirroring, if not exceeding, other leading European centre left parties, thus, focusing on identity inequality rather than wealth and land disparity. Winning hearts and minds on the doorstep of housing schemes is now supplanted by professional focus groups and opinion polls. The former hasn’t worked on the continent as EU elections showed and the latter won’t work here as the votes to be won over are ignored or abjured. Moreover, inequality and climate change are increasing social tensions and the need for more radical action is now required.

A debate on SNP policy and strategy is, therefore, urgently needed – not sound bites and piecemeal actions. The British state is in political meltdown and may never be weaker, yet those who challenge party orthodoxy like Joanna Cherry and Chris McEleny are traduced and side lined. Let the abuse of centralised power cease and debate begin for time is short.

Kenny MacAskill is a former SNP MSP and Justice Secretary. He is now a columnist (with the Scotsman) and writer (with books published on ‘Glasgow 1919: The Rise of Red Clydeside’ and ‘Jiminy Reid: A Scottish Political Journey’).
Pushing up popular participation

Chris Hegarty says Voices for Scotland can re-invigorate the vitality of civic Scotland in its independence campaign

Much is being written about the crisis of democracy, the rise in populism and increasing political polarisation. As a new, civic, grassroots pro-independence campaign that seeks to effect change via democratic engagement, Voices for Scotland has a vested interest in understanding, and helping to tackle, democratic challenges that currently exist in Scotland. But the first thing to do is test the suggestion of a crisis of democracy, and examine the extent to which it applies across the board, including here in Scotland.

So, in September last year, the international media circus rolled into Stockholm, predicting with excitement that Sweden’s long-held social democratic tolerance would be the next domino to fall to populism’s gravitational pull. Once the general election results came in, many stuck doggedly to the prepared script. The Times, for example, reported ‘Right wing radicals make big gains’ and that ‘Sweden’s open-door migration policy has upended the political system’. Yet the anti-immigration Sweden Democrats were supported by 17.6% of voters. As was the case with other small parties, they increased their share of the vote – in their case by 4.7%. In other words, after a period in which Sweden had experienced unprecedented immigration and acceptance of asylum seekers, 82.4% still chose to vote for other parties that did not share the Sweden Democrats’ hostility to immigration.

The more accurate headline here – though one that very few chose to run – might have been ‘Swedes emphatically reject anti-immigration party’. But that didn’t fit the narrative. Perhaps, we need to be careful in making sweeping generalisations. In Scotland, clearly, we face democratic challenges, and politics is in some ways polarised. But we should examine those challenges, and the nature of that polarisation, before suggesting what we might do about them.

Unlike in some other places, Scotland has not yet seen a substantial rise in right-wing populism. Nigel Farage’s UKIP or Brexit parties have polled below 15% in every election in Scotland. While some would characterise Scottish politics as polarised, arguably those ‘poles’ are situated either side of Scotland’s constitutional fault line rather than reflecting increasing left-right or populist-liberal democratic divergence.

Equally, Scotland’s levels of political engagement can be high. The SNP now has roughly as many members as the Tories do across the whole of Britain, the Scottish Greens’ membership multiplied several times over after indyref, and grassroots ‘Yes’ groups continue to thrive nationwide. Scotland’s electoral systems (at Holyrood and local government levels) mean many people still feel that their votes count.

In terms of identifying democratic challenges and polarisation, Scotland might therefore have some similarities to, but also many differences from, other parts of Britain, the US and elsewhere. Three particular challenges from Voices for Scotland’s perspective are: i) voter fatigue; ii) disillusionment with politics, especially Westminster/Brexit; and iii) the need to open up conversations with people who voted ‘no’ or are undecided.

There are clearly mixed views across Scotland on whether, and if so when, we should have another independence referendum. Given how dysfunctional and exhausting British politics has been in recent times, it’s no surprise that some people aren’t as enthusiastic about another big political event as others. But the case for independence is a wholly positive one, based on taking responsibility for our own choices, on making the most of the enormous natural and human resources that Scotland has, and on the democratic and social benefits of being a normal, self-governing country. With the backdrop of British politics being so despairing, a positive campaign that highlights Scotland has another, much more optimistic path open to it can inspire and act as something of an antidote to any voter fatigue that might exist.

Disillusionment with politics, especially with Westminster and Brexit, is both a challenge and an opportunity. What Voices for Scotland needs to do is highlight Scotland’s positive alternative and demonstrate that the benefits of independence will more than repay any investment of time and energy.

In order to open up conversations in which the case for independence can be made, we need to start from where people are. For example, Voices for Scotland’s website features as many voices in favour of the union as it does those who favour independence. Coming from a clearly pro-independence campaign, that takes a bit of getting used to for some people, but it’s about listening to those who voted ‘no’, to their concerns, to their questions, and being willing to open up conversations on their terms, from their starting points.

We also recognise that personality-driven and slightly tribal party political debate can be off-putting to some. This is where Voices for Scotland, as a grassroots organisation, can offer something different. The pro-independence parties are members of the Scottish Independence Convention but there are 23 members in all, so our campaign is not party political and does not promote one particular vision of independence.

More generally, we also need to get away from the perception – in some media, and held by some members of the public – that independence is driven by one individual or one party. It was obvious to everyone involved in the 2014 ‘yes’ campaign how inclusive, broad and diverse the campaign was. Voices for Scotland has a role to play in demonstrating that Scotland’s independence is something that, ultimately, will be led and owned by Scotland’s people – and that would be the opposite of a crisis of democracy.

Chris Hegarty is Coordinator for Voices for Scotland (www.voicesforscotland.scot)
A common defence of liberal democracy is that other systems are worse. Most people’s engagement in the political process is limited to putting a cross in a box every few years, but inability to affect the forces that shape our lives has come to be seen as inevitable. At the same time, isolation is accepted as the twenty-first century normality. So, when we learn of a system that enables people to take control of their lives and work together to build up their communities, we naturally look for lessons.

The mainstream media isn’t very good at publicising alternative systems, but events have made the autonomous Kurdish-dominated region of Syria hard to ignore. And so, increasing numbers of people are hearing about democratic confederalism, the system of bottom-up democracy being established by those who follow the political ideas of imprisoned Kurdish leader, Abdullah Ocalan. This is a system that expects the mechanisms of daily life to be run as locally as possible. At its foundation are communes consisting of a village or a few streets. These send representatives to neighbourhood committees that make decisions that affect larger areas, and so on and so on up a chain. At each level, committees focus on different aspects, such as economics and justice. Requests for resources are transmitted upwards and funds are distributed down from the level of the cantons that make up the Autonomous Administration of North East Syria. (While there is no personal taxation, the system is funded by income from public enterprises and by fees for development and services.)

Two objective factors have facilitated the development of this community-based system. Kurdish culture still retains strong community ties and memories of clan-based organisation; and the lack of other resources and expectations of help make communal self-sufficiency something of a necessity. Indeed, the civil war also saw a flowering of local councils in other parts of Syria, though without the wider organisational network. However, the thinking behind the system was firmly set out by Ocalan, and the main subjective factor has been the organised Kurdish movement based around his ideas. In Syria, this largely takes the form of the Democratic Union Party, or PYD. When I interviewed Saleh Muslim, then co-chair of the PYD, in 2016, he stressed that he saw the main role of his party as political education. PYD cadres work hard at all levels, spreading both ideas and organisational methods.

Ocalan has moved a long way from the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK)’s founding position as a Marxist-Leninist liberation movement. Since his CIA-aided capture in 1999, and incarceration on a Turkish island, he has studied a variety of political theorists, and he has drawn on their ideas – including, notably, Murray Bookchin’s ideas on communalism - to develop the political philosophy that we can see being put into practice in northern Syria. Ocalan’s political philosophy has inspired a millions-strong Kurdish movement that stretches from the PKK guerrillas in the Iraqi mountains to the parliamentarians of the People’s Democratic Party (HDP) in Turkey, from the PYD in Syria to the Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK) in Iran.

Like Bookchin, Ocalan argues that this system of bottom-up autonomy should, ultimately, supersede the oppressive structures of the state. Pragmatically, this allows Kurdish leaders to claim that they pose no immediate threat to the integrity of the states in which they live. The PYD argues for radical change within Syria – though many Kurds have not given up on the idea of an independent Kurdish state.

The contradictions posed by the national question have proved remarkably productive. The PKK was established because the Turkish left failed to understand the additional oppression suffered by the Kurds, or to value their desire for cultural expression, but the nurturing of Kurdish cultural freedom has been extended to encompass the freedom of all ethnic groups. For the Kurdish movement following Ocalan’s philosophy, that philosophy has even become a new form of Kurdish identity that can be shared with the whole world. On our first day in Syria, one of our hosts commented: ‘Kurdishness is no longer an ethnicity, it’s defence of humanity’.

In the original cantons of Rojava (West Kurdistan), and in the areas liberated from Daesh (ISIS), care is taken to ensure that all ethnic groups participate in the new organisational structures. In a region long accustomed to ethnic discrimination, and recently subject to brutal violence carried out in the name of religion, this inclusiveness is hugely valued. Its importance was demonstrated on our visit to Manbij, where we met women from four different ethnic groups working together to build cultural bridges and to widen the outlook and prospects of their sisters from all backgrounds. However, just as with liberal multiculturalism in Britain, care needs to be taken to avoid this welcoming of cultural difference becoming a means for strengthening ethnic boundaries and traditional ethnic leaders.

Perhaps, the most remarkable achievement of the Kurdish movement has been the change in women’s lives and mobilisation. The liberation of women has become pivotal to Ocalan’s writings, and his ideas on ‘jineology’, or the science of women, are a subject of popular and academic study; but this ideological shift is ‘a result of a dialectical process between women’s struggles within the movement and the support of Ocalan’ according to writers Nadje Al-ali and Latif Tas. It is not a paradox of women being liberated by a man, but an example of genuinely responsive leadership (though Ocalan is often given all the credit, even by women themselves).

At issue is not simply the acceptance of women as fighters and campaigners for Kurdish freedom. The nature of the battle itself has changed to incorporate the fight against patriarchy as a foundational force. Attitudes remain hard to shift – even among otherwise-progressive activists – but new freedoms are clear to see. Every important organisation has both a female and male co-chair, and there are quotas for female representation, as well as...
a comprehensive system of separate women’s organisations. Our delegation met women active at all political levels, from the co-chair of the Syrian Democratic Council, which oversees the whole federation, to the feisty women in long dresses and headscarves who are taking control of their own lives through their neighbourhood commune in the backstreets of Kobane.

Among the Syrian Kurds, these ideas have long been nurtured in secret, but, as we saw in Manbij, the drive for women’s rights is also being brought to other communities. A Kurdish friend told me of his pleasure at seeing an Arab woman in Raqqa lose her fear of speaking up for herself, and then arguing back at him. The attack on patriarchy affects all of society, and we were able to observe relaxed and mutually respectful relations between male and female activists.

While achievements for women’s rights have been remarkable, some of the ideas encompassed in ‘jineology’ risk ossifying gender distinctions and burdening women with impossible expectations. Ideas that have been vital in encouraging freedom could end up constraining thought within new limits. I am assured that this is a political movement that welcomes constructive criticism, but there is a tendency to accept Ocalan’s ideas without question – just as some Marxists treat Marx as gospel. Ocalan is undoubtedly a hugely inspirational leader, but the level of devotion shown towards him sits rather oddly within grassroots democracy.

An underlying logic to this system is opposition to ‘capitalist modernity’. This doesn’t disrupt the busy bazaars, but suggests economic decisions should be made in the interests of the community. A lot of hopes have been invested in the establishment of co-ops, though this sector is still very small, and its most significant impact has been to help women gain economic independence. However, I was told that some attempts by foreign capital to establish large-scale businesses have been rebuffed. Disappointingly, there has been no land reform – disproportionate landownership by Arabs makes this an ethnically sensitive issue – but there are controls on house prices and rents, and a lot of agricultural land was already in public ownership.

The other core thread in Ocalan’s philosophy is ecology. With the economy focussed on defence and reconstruction, this is currently more talked about than acted on, but the wider rejection of the insatiable demands of capitalism is the best hope for a more sustainable future. It would be hard to overestimate the difficulties of establishing a new organisational system, even without the added pressures of war and boycott. It helped that the Kurdish movement already had strong underground networks, but all involved accept that this structure is a work in progress, and not without compromises and contradictions. These include the establishment of, more conventional, top-down authorities at the level of the cantons and to oversee the whole federation. This was felt necessary in order to interact in a world of nation states and as a way of bringing in other parties and ethnic groups. They are formed of representatives from different organisations and are bound by a progressive social contract (or constitution) that itself was the product of extensive discussions. These authorities work closely with the councils, but they have introduced potential for conflicting power centres.

Although the PYD are keen to increase democratic participation and legitimacy by encouraging different groups to get involved at all levels, some don’t accept the new political formations: most notably, the Syrian branch of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), the feudal, neoliberal, ruling party in Iraqi Kurdistan. With their support of the embargo on Rojava, of Kurdish fifth columnists in Turkish-occupied Afrin, and of Turkey generally, the KDP are regarded by the PYD as ‘saboteurs’. Reaction to KDP leaders can extend beyond the political, but I would be very wary of taking KDP complaints about mistreatment at face value. Maintaining judicial standards is important, so it was encouraging to discover that a fellow guest at the official guest house in Amude was a consultant advising the administration on the Geneva Convention.

In fact, a total rethinking of the systems of justice and law and order has been central to the democratic project. Disputes of all kinds are dealt with by assemblies of local people, where the emphasis is on reconciliation and rehabilitation, and prison is a last resort. Only cases that can’t be resolved locally are passed up the chain.

A sketch of systems, as given here, cannot portray the liberational, life-affirming, community-strengthening impact of it all; but it was this that stood out in everyone we met. They were taking an active part in building a better world for their families and neighbourhood, for North-East Syria, and - they hoped - beyond; and they were part of a system that, despite huge external difficulties, was there to support them. In the places we visited, political activism wasn’t something to be fitted in, if and when there was time, but an integral part of life that gave it purpose.

Could we build a similarly inspiring system here in Scotland? In Syria, new structures were established in the vacuum created by the civil war. In eastern Turkey, Kurdish organisations attempted to set up their own structures parallel to the state, and found themselves repeatedly and brutally crushed. While Scotland should provide a safer environment, we can’t afford to forget that existing powers will be just as reluctant to give up control, and especially to concede to anything that would restrict the ‘freedom’ of capital. People are reluctant to take on problems they feel should be sorted by government, but there are still plenty of Scottish examples of what can be achieved when communities do come together and organise. Most are isolated, determinedly ‘apolitical’, and not linked to processes of wider change. But if we are serious about transforming society, we can’t leave the politics to others. The Kurds have shown us how to build a politics by - and for - the people.

Sarah Glynn is an activist, academic and architect, and a committee member of Scottish Solidarity with Kurdistan (www.ssonline.org.uk). For another report on her visit to Northern Syria, see https://www.commonspace.scot/articles/13202/women-life-freedom-what-i-found-my-visit-womens-revolution-northern-syria

16 - ScottishLeftReview Issue 112 July/August 2019
Where now for Corbyn on Brexit?

George Reid wonders whether Corbyn is hamstrung by his attachment to the ‘left analysis’ of the EU

‘B

limey, that was us!’ I spluttered, nearly choking on my Sangria. My holiday reading in Spain had been The Alan Clark Diaries, penned by the eponymous enigma who combined ultra-right-wing politics, philandering and class snobbery with – perhaps somewhat surprisingly – passionate environmental concern. About 25 years ago, Pat Kelly, Bill Speirs, and I had spotted Clark waiting grumpily for his lift in the Station Hotel, Inverness – venue for the STUC’s Highlands & Islands Conference the next day. Back then a Ceilidh was held on the eve of Conference. Always game to have a light-hearted poke at the enemy, a spur-of-the-moment invitation was extended to Clark to join the festivities for a wee jig and a dram, given we were all ‘off duty’. Obviously taken aback, Clark gushed how terribly kind we were, but he was waiting to be picked up [heading to his massive estate in Sutherland] and therefore must decline. Happy with our display of magnanimity, we waved him off, proceeded with the evening’s hooley, and thought no more of it. But to our astonishment, his published diary went on to record the incident in unexpectedly glowing terms: ‘These were trade unionists, they knew I was a Tory, wasn’t this just typical of Scottish hospitality, etc, etc.’

Clark’s diaries, elsewhere, make equally gracious references to encounters and conversations with the likes of left Labour MPs, Ian Mikardo and Dennis Skinner. Further confirmation that those you face in politics are your opponents, whereas it’s within your own party that you find your real enemies. Labour and Tories still vie to see who can keep this particular fire burning brightest.

Brexit is awash with dilemmas: for Corbyn himself; for the new and the young (often naturally strong Europeans) that Corbyn has attracted to Labour; and for the likes of me too, who consider there’s plenty wrong with the EU, but it’s crazy to unleash Boris to rampage all over our future, wielding his gleaming Brexit scimitar in the interests of the class he represents. It’s always seemed bizarre to represent this ultra-right funded Brexit nirvana as being, simultaneously, a progressive step towards socialism and internationalism. We, I think, can be guided by an analysis without being imprisoned by it.

Corbyn’s dilemma is never about how he sees the EU. His position and record are crystal clear. It’s a neo-liberal capitalist club which fundamentally obstructs socialist policies. Delivering us from that would be glory enough, were it not that the Tories are driving the bus. Even so, Corbyn’s hardly going to let this one escape easily.

No, the real dilemma for Corbyn is how he deals with three different types of internal strife. First, there’s the predictable onslaught from the right of the party, seething and licking their wounds since day one of Corbyn’s impertinent elevation. ‘Use any weapon at your disposal’ isn’t just the battle cry of the bar-room rammy. Brexit, accusations of anti-semitism, anything will do as a proxy in the Labour right’s media-supported quest to snuff out its elected leader. This is an embattled and embittered Labour right, in a party of permanently locked horns. In the blue corner are those who tell us, endlessly, that policies without power mean nothing, versus those in the red corner who claim power without radical change is pointless. Cue permanent war.

Second, and more worrying for Corbyn, are the increasing departures from the script by Thornberry, Starmer, Gardiner and even McDonnell. Outward ripples which are bound to signify more rumbustious disagreements when the doors are closed. And third – and this is where Corbyn should be most concerned – many of his new, enthusiastic support seem to regard Corbyn’s instinctive anti-EU position (originating often before they were born) as something of a mystery, coming as it does from a hero in every other respect.

You have to hand it to someone who’s boosted Labour’s membership so incredibly. He even has his own song for goodness sake. But many fans are now singing another chorus: ‘Love Corbyn, Hate Brexit’. Maybe they’ll set that one to music too. For Jezza, this must now be an uncomfortably frequent refrain from young supporters who instinctively see themselves as European. Corbyn may soften if he feels he must, and there are some faint hints of that. But no-one should take that to mean he sees the EU any differently.

There are many reasons to admire Corbyn, even if it’s too much to hope that he might one day support change to Labour’s suicidal (in Scotland) position on the constitutional issue. Maybe the difficulty in weighing him up, overall, is my own dilemma. Eyes firmly on a general election, Jezza will tough out his own Brexit position as long as he can, even among those who surely must tell him daily that you can’t make progress wearing lead boots. Because if you’ve waited this long for a go at the second-biggest prize of all, nothing must get in the way. Even if that amounts to shoe-horning your own vision of Brexit into the type of country gent’s brogues more suited to Alan Clark.

George Reid worked for the Scottish Government and was a PCS Branch secretary and chair for thirty years. He is no relation to – but was frequently and sometimes hilariously confused with – his namesake, the former Presiding Officer of the Parliament.
Scottish Labour: hope after adversity

Siobhan McCreedy says it's time for Leonard's leadership to be supported not supplanted

When Richard Leonard won the Scottish Labour leadership race in 2017, many saw it as a signal we were now firmly on a different path. New activists, enthused by the messages coming from British Labour and Jeremy Corbyn, saw this as a defining moment: we had left the bruising experience of 2014 behind and were back on track. There was so much positive energy around Richard's campaign for the leadership that you'd be forgiven for assuming that energy would carry on and we'd now be in a much stronger position. But this is the Labour Party.

The near wipe-out of Labour in Scotland has been a sobering experience. We are in uncharted waters, it’s unsettling, scary at times. How did it come to this? Who is to blame? Why do the electorate not hear/understand/believe/trust our message? Why do others in the Party not get the message? What is that message? No matter what wing of the Party you identify with, the questions tend to be the same. Only the people to blame change. It’s frankly a waste of energy and just says to the electorate that we are a squabbling rabble, unfit to govern. At times, they are entirely right to hold that view!

Richard sits in the midst of this. A decent principled man with a track record of delivering for workers before entering Holyrood. He brings real life experience and a passion for the history of the labour movement that defines him, a good Labour man. His first act as leader was a quick exit to the BiFab plant in Methil showing solidarity with the workers fighting to save their jobs. Exactly where the history of the labour movement that defines him, a good Labour man. His first act as leader was a quick exit to the BiFab plant in Methil showing solidarity with the workers fighting to save their jobs. Exactly where the Labour and Jeremy Corbyn, saw this as a signal we were now firmly on a different path. New activists, enthused by the messages coming from British Labour and Jeremy Corbyn, saw this as a defining moment: we had left the bruising experience of 2014 behind and were back on track. There was so much positive energy around Richard's campaign for the leadership that you'd be forgiven for assuming that energy would carry on and we'd now be in a much stronger position. But this is the Labour Party.

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His first act as leader was a quick exit to the BiFab plant in Methil showing solidarity with the workers fighting to save their jobs. Exactly
Revisiting funding local government and local services

Mike Danson and Geoff Whittam summarise their research on where new local government funding can come from

Local government has had the largest cut in Scottish government funding allocations in recent years, bearing the brunt of austerity. UNISON, along with others, has been highlighting the overall cuts and in their ‘damage’ report series have set out their members’ views of the impact on individual services. Our various previous reports to UNISON (see, for example, Scottish Left Review Nov/Dec 2017) have argued for a more interventionist role for local government in areas like procurement, the environment and municipal energy in order to contribute to reversing cuts to local government activities, to allow local government to play a fuller role in promoting local economies and communities, and to protect public services; all these initiatives and strategies mean securing greater revenues.

However, there have been progressive cuts to the core budgets for local authorities for over a decade with detrimental effects for the provision of public services. Facing more years of uncertainty and austerity, the demand for local government services and employment will become ever more pressing but with continuing severe pressures on budgets and priorities. Within the constraints of the powers available to the Scottish Parliament, there is a need to identify possible new sources of funding and finance to meet these needs. Our research for UNISON on these issues was launched in April 2019 and this summary offers the opportunity to carry forward the debate.

Analyses by the Improvement Service, the Accounts Commission, Audit Scotland and others have recognised how local government delivers efficient and effective public services and could make greater contributions to inclusive growth and quality public services. These analyses highlight the important contribution local government makes to our communities and to the local economy in particular. Although health and education have been largely insulated from the damaging effects of overall austerity cuts, key areas of creativity, culture and leisure, planning and environmental services have seen disproportionately high reductions in spending. After decades of efficiency strategies of ‘best value’, ‘public sector management’, followed by PPP/PFI schemes, housing stock transfer and moves of employment and activities out to ALEOs (arms-length external organisations), austerity cuts have left few areas for further reductions without damaging the economic and social life of local communities.

Further rounds of restructuring, reductions of back office ‘support’ functions, management ‘de-layering’, reduction in estate costs and changes to commissioning and procurement, therefore, are unlikely to offer any significant savings for redeployment in local government budgets. With critical further expenditure falls in the pipeline, it is vital to the health and wellbeing of citizens, the workforce and local communities and economies that new funding streams for local services are identified.

This puts the focus onto identifying opportunities to increase local authority revenues. Looking at recent Scottish Budgets, there has been some divergence at Holyrood from the Westminster approach to tax and spend policies, but there is little further room for making the tax system more progressive. Varying the Scottish Rate of Income Tax (SRIT) and income tax thresholds have made some contribution to making the system less regressive, but SRIT is limited to ‘non-dividend, non-savings’ incomes. Meanwhile, local authorities are heavily dependent on the Scottish Government and the Council Tax for funding; the first does not underpin democratic accountability at the local level and Council Tax is regressive. New and different forms of local government funding are, therefore, required.

In that context, and given the time and planning needed to make any radical changes to fiscal measures and instruments, it is wise to learn from the series of inquiries, commissions and other rigorous proposals on alternatives for local finance. These offer a consensus around moving to progressive local property taxes, with several arguing that land value taxation should also be introduced in due course developing these initial moves away from Council Tax. As Professor Richard Kerley of Queen Margaret University has argued, a key challenge is to restore accountability in local democracy. An important element in this is the need to link taxation with services; this is a recurrent theme in the literature and public discourse, with a widespread desire for local government to regain greater controls over its funding.

Despite the spurious claims by Tory politicians that taxes overall are higher in Scotland than elsewhere, this is neither true for those on average or lower incomes, while Council taxpayers in the Scottish Borders, for instance, pay £508 less than their close neighbour counterparts in Northumbria. This suggests there is an argument for raising more from local taxpayers to recognise that they receive better services at lower costs than those in the rest of Britain. Resurrecting the Burt and other tax commissions, there will be cross-party talks about ways of replacing the Council Tax in the next Scottish Parliament (2021-2026). Despite this further delay in significant change, there is the manifesto promise of a progressive property tax being introduced within the next five years. Such a radical change should be aiming to usher in higher revenues than the current Council Tax and in a progressive and inclusive approach. As the cross party 2015 Commission on Local Tax Reform argued:

*Our analysis therefore indicates that a more proportionate property*
tax, implemented alongside a more progressive system of income and need based reliefs, would be much fairer than the present council tax and connect better to both the income and the wealth interpretations of ‘ability to pay’. This is consistent with the conclusions of the Burt Review that: a new progressive Local Property Tax (LPT) be introduced, based on the capital value of individual properties and payable by households occupying properties (whether as owner-occupiers or as tenants) and by owners of second homes and unoccupied properties.

Complementing the normal property tax, we argue for a ‘wealth or heritable property tax’ to capture those who avoid paying income tax in Scotland but own substantial assets. Such a fiscal innovation could generate significant revenues and presage and subsequently work alongside a land value tax. As Scotland is one of the most unequal countries in the world as it suffers from gross inequities embedded in the political economic structures and processes of Britain, radical means to reverse the growth of inequality is essential.

Our analysis supported a number of recommendations which we have been discussing with trade unionists, academics and others over recent months. These recommendations can be summarised in four key points: first and in the short term, the Scottish Government, COSLA, local government and professional bodies working together to identify where loopholes, avoidance and coverage have allowed some to escape making their fair contribution to the collection of tax revenues. This would suggest recruitment of additional staff to ensure that registration, regulation and collection of revenues is undertaken, and this could be achieved cost effectively so adding to total funds in net terms.

Second, with adoption of the recommendations from the Budget Process Review Group for the Committees of the Scottish Parliament to adopt longer horizons in the scrutiny and planning of Scottish Government and Parliament strategies and policies, there should be an expectation that all involved will seek to identify where current practices and priorities are not fit for purpose. The critiques of such instruments as the Small Business Bonus Scheme and other Non-Domestic Rate reliefs suggest there are areas of public subsidy that may not be the optimal approach to supporting new and small enterprises and so an inclusive and competitive economy. Some of these policies cost local government many hundreds of millions of pounds every year and so deliberations should lead to proposals for better targeting in the following budget.

Such initiatives for local government funding as the Work Place Levy, Tourism taxes, Charges for Disposable Cups and other packaging require legislation to be passed by the Scottish Parliament and so their introduction will be in the medium term. More significantly, moves to replace the Council Tax with a progressive Property Tax will require a more extensive period of design and planning, valuations of properties, establishment of processes and appeals mechanisms before implementation.

Improving the degree of subsidiarity and local accountability which lies at the heart of successful economies and societies has ongoing and long-term implications. Promoting the empowerment of local communities and workforces, building a foundational economy and reducing the historical and globally high levels of inequality and poverty cannot be separated from the need for alternative sources for funding local public services and government; they will be addressed more effectively and efficiently in an integrated manner, again as recommended by the Budget Process Review Group.

Third, some of the changes required to make the tax system progressive and inclusive require further constitutional changes. To capture all those who have the opportunities to gain from their income, wealth and spending in Scotland will mean devolution of new fiscal and other powers to the Scottish Parliament. Ability to tax fairly should be facilitated equitably across all groups so that the wealthy cannot escape contributing to public services by uneven treatment of earned and unearned incomes, and wealth in different forms. Having the means to levy taxes on all equally will require transfer of powers and this may take further time. Some resource-based taxes require such devolution while others, for example on land values, should start to be explored now but will need time for subsequent implementation.

A final recommendation concerned a radical proposal for a new move to re-municipalisation, following many successful examples in Europe in recent times. In an early change in this direction, amendments to the Transport Bill from Scottish Labour and the Scottish Government will allow councils to run bus services and set up arm’s-length bus companies. With the success of Lothian Buses, this would present opportunities to generate revenues that have been lost from cuts and enforced deregulation of buses, housing stock transfers etc. Also, it could both support local authorities to maintain the levels of services needed by their citizens and to meet societal challenges in the future, for example in terms of the climate emergency, social care and recycling.

With the approach of the next Scottish Parliament elections on 6 May 2021, we hope that these ideas will be taken up by the progressive parties in the Scottish Parliament when they begin to draft their manifestos for fighting those elections.

Mike Danson is Professor of Enterprise Policy at Heriot-Watt University and Geoff Whittam is a Reader in Entrepreneurship at Glasgow Caledonian University. The report was launched at the STUC congress and was the main media story of that congress. It is available at http://reidfoundation.org/2019/04/unison-scotland-commissioned-report-on-alternative-sources-of-funding-for-local-government/ See also the STUC’s 2018 Briefing: 2018/19 Scottish Budget, http://www.stuc.org.uk/files/budget%20final.pdf.
Fighting and winning in FE

Pam Currie reflects on the successes of the further education lecturers’ campaign for better conditions

Scottish further education lecturers settled a pay dispute in June 2019 after six days of strike action – the only part of the Scottish public sector to take strike action in pursuit of a cost of living pay rise this year. For those EIS-FELA members, this bitter dispute was always about more than pay. Further education (FE) colleges were semi-privatised in 1993 when they were removed from local authority control and placed under business-dominated, Boards of Management.

The years that followed saw an explosion in management posts and salaries while local bargaining led to huge divergence in lecturer pay and terms and conditions across the sector – the strongest branches holding firm on conditions and increasing pay while the weakest fell further behind.

As Cabinet Secretary for Education in the SNP government of 2011, Mike Russell made few friends in further education, forcing large scale mergers and reducing Scotland’s 41 colleges to just 26. As part of this programme of reforms, Russell brought a national bargaining structure into existence, but his successor, Angela Constance, had taken office before negotiations stalled and the first national industrial action took place in March 2016.

The one-day strike in March 2016 had a simple demand – equal pay for lecturers, closing a sector-wide salary gap of £14,000. After a quarter century of local bargaining, building a national union in FE was no easy task – we represent 5,000 members spread from Stranraer to Shetland, with lecturers often entering FE as a second career after a lifetime in non-union industries.

National bargaining met with fierce management opposition from the outset. In March 2016, none of the Glasgow colleges and only four UHI colleges had signed up, and principals openly doubted the ability of the union to reach beyond the large central belt colleges. They got a fright – a combination of lay member-led organising and social media ensured picket lines across the country and management folded the next day, agreeing a transition to equal pay across a three-year period.

The struggle for equal pay was never going to be an easy win. In the months that followed the first victory in 2016, management regrouped and started to resist, insisting that they would not pay out without swinging attacks on terms and conditions.

Further strike action followed in 2017 with the ‘Honour the Deal’ campaign. Lay officials visited staffrooms the length and breadth of the country and a high-profile social media campaign delivered the necessary statutory ballot turnout – by now, we had active branches even in colleges that had not signed up to national bargaining. After six days of strike action management conceded, paying the equal pay settlements won in 2016 and agreeing to new national terms and conditions.

National bargaining was now established across the country.

Equal pay for lecturers was not a pay rise, but an equal pay settlement to ensure lecturers were paid the same rate for the job across the country - it took no account of the cost of living. After two years of fruitless negotiations, we took a further six days of strike action from January 2019, supported by a withdrawal of goodwill and resulting boycott, in pursuit of a cost of living pay claim. In contrast to the teachers’ restorative pay claim, our demands were modest – a rise in line with public sector pay policy and the award already made to support staff unions in the sector for the same period.

The attitude of Colleges Scotland and the Scottish Government to this dispute and to the further education sector more widely stands in stark contrast to the approach adopted in the teachers’ dispute. Despite increasingly wild press releases and parliamentary briefings containing apparent factual inaccuracies, the Scottish Government failed to intervene. The Scottish Funding Council even accepted and validated management figures which inaccurately portrayed our pay claim as costing double that of the support staff – in fact, the difference was marginal.

EIS-FELA members have responded by standing strong and united on the picket lines and in our branches. While there was a danger that the teachers’ pay campaign – with 50,000 EIS members to our 5,000 – would overshadow us, the campaigns have created an organising energy in the union and have fed into and inspired one another, with more cross-sector union work as a result. In the next session, this will be taken forward through the lecturer professionalism agenda, where we are fighting against attempts to introduce ‘instructor’ and ‘assessor’ roles to deliver the curriculum to learners – damaging the quality of learning and teaching and undermining national conditions in a way that would not even be conceived of in Scottish schools.

In the past four years, we have fought and we have won – equal pay for lecturers, national terms and conditions, a national transfer to permanence agreement which will drastically reduce the number of staff on zero hours and fixed term contracts, and a cost of living pay rise – and these apply to lecturers across the entire sector.

Pam Currie is the president of the Educational Institute of Scotland-Further Education Lecturers’ Association (EIS-FELA) (see https://www.eis.org.uk/FELA/FELAStrike).
Governance, marketization and Scotland’s universities

Jeremy Valentine dissects the destruction of our public universities and suggests what changes are needed to re-invigorate them as ‘public goods’ institutions

Even though Scotland’s universities are currently a devolved matter, they are not unaffected by political developments at the British level. For example, following the recent Westminster government commissioned 2019 Augur report on post-18 education, Alastair Sim, Director of the Scottish Principals’ pressure group, Universities Scotland, was quick to point out that Scottish universities have been doing many of the report’s ‘best’ proposals prior to publication. But Sim also warned that the report’s proposed reduction of fees for students attending universities in England, Wales and Northern Ireland would have a negative impact on the Scottish governments’ no-fees policy for Scottish and EU students attending Scottish universities. That is because: ‘When the Scottish government decided to make undergraduate education free for Scottish and EU-domiciled students in 2011, one pillar of the funding model to support free higher education was the new revenue stream that would come in to Scotland from fees paid by students from the rest-of-UK’. In the event of a fee reduction, Scottish universities would be faced with an annual shortfall of £30m because there would be no advantage if Scottish universities charged rest-of-UK students with higher fees than rest-of-UK universities.

Sim took the opportunity to ask for funding to replace any lost fee income from the Scottish Government, because without it the financial decline of Scottish universities would get worse. Confirmation of that decline can be found in Audit Scotland’s 2016 report on Scotland’s universities. This shows a pattern similar to that found in the rest of Britain, with a few relatively secure big hitters, a lot more struggling to get by, and some on the verge of going under.

The Augur report is one of the latest attempts by successive Westminster governments since the Thatcher reforms of the 1980s to drive the development of universities in the direction of marketization and privatisation, a policy framework often referred to as ‘neo-liberalism’ by its critics. Despite its breadth, and a welcome attempt to address the underfunding of further and vocational education, the main focus of Augur was upon the relationship between cost, price and the labour market value of university qualifications. Accounting for university finances turned out to be more of a challenge than anticipated and Augur had to employ the international consultancy firm KPMG to try and work it out. Even then no one really knows if teaching subsidises research, or the other way around, or if science subjects subsidises humanities and social sciences, or the other way around, or if lucrative international student fees subsidise everything. Despite that, the drive towards marketization has been supported by the creation of the Office for Students (OfS) and the 2017 Higher Education Reform Act (HERA) which encourages private providers.

Although formally outside of the reach of these developments, with its own equally complicated administrative structures, Scotland’s universities are not immune to these marketization pressures. For example, Scottish universities participate in the Britain-wide Research Excellence Framework (REF), a funding competition that allocates money on the basis of published research and ranks competitors on the basis of who won most, and some participate in the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), a deeply flawed exercise which ranks universities on the basis of teaching quality and graduate earnings. The idea behind these exercises is that the rankings they produce will determine student choice of both university and subject of study, with the consequence that the losers will be eliminated through competition and demands on taxation reduced, which would happen irrespective of whether fees are charged or not. The survivors would be left to their own devices to obtain other financial resources.

These developments are not confined to Britain. Through international agencies such as the World Bank, the OECD and regional alliances such as the EU, these developments are promoted and organised at a global level. An unaccountable ‘global executive class’, which includes university managers, is interested in the ‘value capture’ of the broad knowledge wealth and assets produced by university workers and students. Within Britain, resistance to that became visible during the 2018 UCU strike in defence of pensions which grew to confront university managers over their betrayal and perversion of the public university function under the slogan ‘we are the university’, not least because of the work that academic workers are required to do in support of marketization which elbows out time for teaching and research.

Within Scotland, there is an opportunity to make opposition to marketization a structural feature of universities as a consequence of the 2016 Higher Education Governance (Scotland) Act introduced by the SNP government. Compliance with the act requires that the governing bodies of universities (‘courts’) become socially representative and include union participation. Despite the fact that failure to implement the act entails negative financial consequences, the managements of many Scottish universities are using all the tactics of delay and fudge they can muster to neutralise it.

Management opposition to the act might indicate that it’s a good thing as far as the democratic accountability and social responsibility of universities is concerned. It is, but it only goes so far as the top end of formal university structures of power and rule. It is not able to drill down to the political reality of how universities are run, the level at which market supporting decisions are made and implemented. The characteristics of that reality were indicated in a previous Jimmy Reid Foundation publication in 2013 called The Democratic University in which the authors identified and opposed the emergence of Senior Management Teams (SMTs) composed of academic and non-academic managers as the
unaccountable shadow executives of universities that govern through the rubber stamping of decisions. These SMTs have arisen because managers have seized the idea of university autonomy and used it as a justification for the old school Thatcherite assertion of ‘the right of managers to manage’.

Empowered in that way, SMTs resist scrutiny and accountability and determine the conduct of the bewildering variety of academic structures and procedures through which the conduct of universities is established. Consequently, the value of academic freedom is perverted as the privilege of managerial authority and the freedom of academics to criticise and oppose that is denied. Through direct and indirect monitoring and surveillance academics are accountable to SMTs, but not the other way around. In that way, and supported by the disciplinary sticks of employment law, academic conduct is driven to support SMT interests and the allocation of resources required to establish them.

The authors of the Jimmy Reid Foundation report call SMT domination the ‘corporate hegemony model’ (CHM). Derived from the writings of the Italian Marxist theorist and Communist politician imprisoned by Mussolini, Antonio Gramsci, the notion of hegemony refers to the balance of coercion and consent required to establish leadership. Extending the report’s analysis, it is important to recall that Gramsci argued that consent, in his case to Fascism, was achieved by the actions of subalterns, the so-called ‘NCOs’ of hegemony. Subalterns occupy a place in the command structure between the higher-ups (managers) and the rank-and-file (academics). SMTs are able to implement that through a divide and rule strategy in which academics are placed in decisive positions in return for supporting their policies. Not only does that replicate corporate ‘greasy pole’ politics and turf wars but universities also become less autonomous in relation to the environment which government shapes in order to manage them.

Changes in the internal authority of universities to reflect that are driven by managers who justify their actions as obedience to the rapid turnover of government policies and initiatives. SMTs recruit non-academic corporate managers to informal governance structures in order to demonstrate compliance with government, and especially marketing departments which represent universities in uniform marketing terms. In turn, the distinction between academics, government and the private sector becomes porous and elastic.

One consequence of that has been the increase of reports of bullying, harassment and intimidation and the deterioration of physical and mental health as rank-and-file academic workers struggle with the rising demands of teaching and research and orders to support the direction of marketization in a context in which collegiality has been replaced by pathological command and control-freakery.

One of the main ways that governments have shaped the activity of universities as economic actors has been through the expectation that they would contribute to the so-called ‘knowledge economy’. Because the results of that have been unreliable and disappointing in relation to the money universities received to do it, the emphasis has switched to the direct commodification of education itself. The upshot of that has been a variety of attempts to increase the exchange value of qualifications in labour markets, which in turn has distorted curricula without providing any guarantees that the work actually exists.

Similarly, in order to reduce academic labour costs curricula are being standardised in order to be converted into correspondence courses delivered through the internet. Again, although the results of so-called Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCS) have been pathetic and the push for their adoption has intensified, not least because the global flows of speculative financial capital that run through IT and internet firms that seek to expand into the ‘edu-tech’ sector. As well as rents from intellectual properties, universities will also provide data that can be used to control academics and students and commodified in Ponzi-scheme markets. Consequently, the price of a normal university education will rise, instituting a ‘bricks for the rich, clicks for the poor’ divide. University education will be ‘unbundled’ and ‘re-bundled’ in the same way as communication and utility services, with the same deliberately confusing tariff rates.

If changes to governance are intended to maintain the democratic and public character of universities and halt the invasion of marketization then they need to address the following issues. Managers have created a ‘them-and-us’ antagonism with rank-and-file academics which is supported by the excessive salaries they reward themselves with and the precarious status many of the latter are reduced to. If salary differences are narrowed, to a ratio of 6:1 say, then managers would have less incentive to implement marketization, and more to support the academic rank-and-file in a stewardship role, and help restore academic freedom and autonomy. Perhaps above all, the ambiguity around the ownership of universities needs to be resolved in order to destroy the illusion that it belongs to managers who enjoy the narcissistic claim that they ‘own’ the actions that they undertake. It would also set a limit to the commercial encroachment of university governance. For that reason, proposals for the creation of commonly owned cooperative universities have become prominent. The bottom line is that knowledge is a public asset and as such the conditions for its production, distribution and consumption should be shared as widely as possible in order to support social individuals in the creation of a knowledge society.

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Green revolt on our streets

Niamh McNulty explains why XR Scotland has done what it’s done and what it will still do

In April 2019, Extinction Rebellion (XR) launched a week of civil disobedience. It saw roads in major cities closed to motorists and turned into sites of defiance and community, operating as stages for the anger, grief and hope of thousands of people. Arrests reached the thousands. In Scotland, on 16 April, we blocked North Bridge in Edinburgh from traffic for five hours, contributing 29 arrests to the count.

North Bridge is a main route in Edinburgh, connecting the old to new town, therefore serving as a strategic point in the fight that XR takes on. Targeted actions can seem more obvious and more likely to engage decision-makers. Why did we not target government buildings or oil companies? Why disrupt ordinary people? The answer is two-fold. First, other actions, such as occupying the debating chamber of the Scottish parliament on 25 January, and disrupting the Scottish Oil Club’s annual dinner took on these tasks. There is no intention of slowing up or leaving it at that, as demonstrated by the parliament lock-ons on 4 June and the Holyrood Rebel camp set up outside parliament from where this is written. Second, the fight for climate justice does not exist solely at the doors of the powers that be. Rousing people into action and mobilizing a critical component of the population needs to happen because we win when we can’t be ignored and our interests are given greater credence than that of corporates. What this means, is that power, or rather agency, is ours for the taking. That the powerful act lightly but with heavy hearts. In the end, whatever people think, they have thought about it. As more disruption is caused the more the government is forced to acquiesce to our demands. Aside from that, an action on your doorstep is an accessible way of demonstrating your discontent publicly.

It is essential to make clear that the success of placing the climate emergency into the national agenda is a preliminary one. It is crucial but, declarations of climate emergency aren’t enough. As the first XR demand goes: ‘Tell the truth and act as though the truth is real’. The latter isn’t happening yet but, now we have their words to hold them to, the atmosphere of urgency and the people to create pressure. This is where the strategy of arrest comes into play. It highlights the hypocrisy between the state’s rhetoric and its actions. While ministers and government officials nurture the line that Scotland is a world leader, committed to radical change, their response at North Bridge revealed their discomfort with truly adopting meaningful policy and desire to curb our relentlessness. Police were sent in from across Scotland in a display of strength as hundreds of police officers stood off with 29 sitting protestors; van loads of riot police sat around the corners in anticipation of rowdiness we’ve never given them any reason to expect. They made every attempt to intimidate, from following rebels between meeting points to attempting to kettle protesters. This only became more apparent at the time of writing as we attempted multiple roadblocks in the city centre on 17 June when horses and riot vans were deployed in a disproportionate response to actions and other meetings of XR folk. Somebody is feeling tetchy; somebody wants to silence us. When we put our bodies, reputations and livelihoods on the line during the legal process, we reveal the true colours of the state. We bring the state, not just ourselves, to court rooms in the face of government inaction as nothing short of ecocide. We ask: who is really breaching the peace?

XR Scotland want leaders to tell the truth about the climate emergency and act as if it’s real by setting a 2025 target for net-zero carbon emissions. To oversee this, and to rapidly transform Scottish society, we wish to see the establishment of a Climate Citizens’ Assembly. We are on our way to achieving this – our success always treads the wire between falling into obscurity or disrepute and heading onward to the ever more palpable goal of a decarbonized Scotland with a democracy fit for purpose. If we are to push through, we must not ease up the pressure. We must continue to bring the issue to the streets and crucially, we must always work to make our actions more accessible, safer and dig deeper down into issues of intersectionality to shape a truly just transition.

Niamh McNulty is part of the Actions Working Group of Extinction Rebellion Scotland.
Poverty and people

The UN Special Rapporteur Report on Extreme Poverty in Britain illustrates the impact of austerity and a hostile policy environment. But what, Lynn Williams asks, does it mean for Scotland?

The Glasgow Council for the Voluntary Sector (GCVS) recently held a ‘Community Event’ with Mark Carney, governor of the Bank of England (BoE), providing an opportunity to consider the impact of economic policy on people and communities. Given its reach, impact and influence, the BoE request to meet and speak with charities and community groups was too good an opportunity to miss. Carney and his team spent a great deal of time talking with groups working with work women who have experienced sexual abuse, with unpaid carers, with children, amongst others.

These organisations represent our fellow citizens and were able to lay out in stark terms the ways in which families and communities have been deeply affected by years of austerity, structural barriers and deliberate political decisions which have exacerbated existing inequalities.

Too often, the economy and economic performance in political and public discourse are discussed in the abstract – as ‘things’ which sit outside the reality of our everyday lives. So, the Bank’s community events provide an important reality check for officials who can influence the highest levels. But what charities told Carney and his team was not new – the impact of policy on people’s lives is out there and in various reports and analyses. Not least of these is the stunningly heart-breaking report by Professor Philip Alston on extreme poverty in the UK (https://undocs.org/A/HRC/41/39/Add.1).

Alston paints a disturbing picture of what happens when ideology drives economic and social policy. We see millions left behind by a myriad of cuts to social support and a labour market which cannot guarantee decent jobs. He commented: ‘It is hard to imagine a recipe better designed to exacerbate inequality and poverty and to undermine the life prospects of many millions’. His report is a stark and ‘no holds barred’ assessment of the Westminster Government’s austerity programme. He described this as social re-engineering and he is right.

Economic and fiscal management is a constant mantra of all political parties. There is no doubt that this current and previous Westminster governments have used this mantra as a screen for policies which have ‘gutted’ and ‘eliminated’ key public services. We see deep levels of destitution as any previous safety nets are torn apart. There is no doubt that this ideological drive to push people towards self-reliance is in fact inflicting harm on people. In some cases, like the reduction of Universal Credit Working Allowances, that harm is intentional. Disabled people are increasingly isolated or institutionalized and millions cannot afford the most basic things required to survive. That’s the message from Alston’s report.

Now, I turn to the Rapporteur’s view of Scotland. The Scottish Government gets off relatively lightly – there is a critique on transparency in policy making and a need to ensure that social security claimants in the fledgling Scottish system have clear routes to redress. Yet, civil society is actively campaigning for more immediate use of new social security powers to tackle child poverty in Scotland; people with disabilities and carers are finding it harder to access key services such as social care - this reality is masked by a political focus on free personal care. The work done by the Scottish campaign on the Care Tax shows inflation busting increases in care charging are still present and that disabled people are often no better off with the expansion of free personal care.

Alston’s report does not cover these issues. Whilst he argues that the Westminster Government has chosen to completely ignore his work, some might argue that the Scottish Government has its head in the sand about the reality of poverty here. Scotland faces its own poverty and human rights challenges, even though political intention is not malign. We see the poor implementation of policies which have ‘gutted’ and ‘eliminated’ key public services. We see deep levels of destitution as previous safety nets are torn apart. There is no doubt that this ideological drive to push people towards self-reliance is in fact inflicting harm on people. In some cases, like the reduction of Universal Credit Working Allowances, that harm is intentional. Disabled people are increasingly isolated or institutionalized and millions cannot afford the most basic things required to survive. That’s the message from Alston’s report.

For the sake of the 1 in 4 children in poverty, families facing destitution, disabled people increasingly isolated as local services are cut further and for carers forced to give up work because social care is impossible to access, action is needed. The people factor is critical – we cannot lose sight of the human costs here. To miss the opportunity currently in our grasp would be to fail tens of thousands of our fellow citizens.

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China: red star still rising at seventy?

Bill Bonnar explains the path China is on and the challenges it faces

The People’s Republic of China (PRC) celebrates its seventieth birthday this year. It’s moved from being a war-ravaged vassal of western imperialism to the world’s second largest economy. What are socialists to make of this? Analysis is often like this. From 1949-1978, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) oversaw the greatest socialist revolution in history. Since 1978, it has overseen the greatest capitalist revolution in history. In the latter, if China has undergone a capitalist transformation, it is like no other such transformation we have ever witnessed. A ‘socialist market economy’ overwhelmingly owned and controlled by the state, an economy where capitalised planning still predominates over the market and where the state remains the principal driving force in economic development. All overseen by the CCP which states the process currently being taken is part of the overall aim of building socialism.

To understand PRC history, one has to understand the CCP’s history. When it emerged victorious from the civil war in 1949, it was not a conventional political party. In fact, it was more like a broad-based national liberation movement. Interestingly, the first PRC constitution stated the CPC was the leading force in society at the head of an alliance of workers, peasants and domestic bourgeoisie. Once the PRC was established, an immense division opened up about the way forward and would engulf Chinese politics for the next 30 years.

The party split into two factions often referred to as the ‘Maoists’ and the ‘Capitalist Roaders’. For the Maoists, things were simple. The 1949 revolution was socialist and quickly established a socialist system. Which meant that China was not capitalist and, therefore, China needed to go through a period of capitalist style development to transform the country into a modern state. The key measure would be the change from a predominately rural to a predominately urban society; something achieved in the past decade.

This division convulsed Chinese politics, reaching its peak during the Cultural Revolution from 1966-1970. However, by 1976 the Capitalist Roaders had triumphed and set about their plans. In 1978, they launched the ‘Four Great Modernisations’; which is what we have witnessed in China for the past 40 years.

Today, it is the world’s largest manufacturing economy. It is an economy with the outward appearance of capitalism. Yet, all large manufacturing companies are, to a greater or lesser extent, state-owned and controlled with the profits mostly going to the state. The private sector, in the conventional sense, is relatively small and is overwhelmingly located in small businesses and in the rural economy. Foreign investment is marginal and tightly restricted and controlled through the system of joint-stock companies partly owned by the government. Some western economists had believed that all this would eventually lead to the rise of a more recognisable capitalist economy yet there is little evidence of this. In fact, as the economy has grown and become more diverse, the main thrust of government policy appears to one of consolidating state control.

China is governed by a centralised one-party system. This has led some western commentators to argue for the overthrow of the CPC and that China must move towards some kind of western style multi-party democracy. This demonstrates an ignorance of Chinese politics, culture and society bordering on stupidity. For most Chinese, the CPC is the current incarnation of the Chinese state - more like a civil service than a political party. In China, the state is revered as the foundation stone of Chinese culture and civilisation, the guarantor of stability and the defence against chaos. For most, the idea of overthrowing the CPC means overthrowing the state.

The issues are, rather, of democracy and civil rights. China is not and never has been a democracy and has little tradition of human rights (individual, community, workers). Bringing about a civil rights-based political system is its greatest political challenge. When China was primarily a rural society, this was difficult with a largely traditional, socially conservative population. Most Chinese now are better educated, have more of a world outlook, live in an urban setting and are now more likely to demand greater civil rights.

By any definition, China is a success story. In a single generation, there has been a transformation on a scale unparalleled in human history, transforming the lives of the Chinese people for the better. The present course is set to continue for the indefinite future. There will, of course, be many challenges which include the following.

What will be the future balance between an increasingly diverse and complex economy and centralised state? What will be the state’s response to the growing demands for more civil rights and how will it respond if these campaigns take on an organised and mass form? Can China maintain the growth rates of the last few decades and should it? How will it deal with the consequences of rapid economic development on climate change? How will it exercise its increasing role as a global super power?

For socialists, does this represent a model for the transition to socialism and at what stage, if ever, does this transition period end and socialism be established? This is all debatable but what is clear is that we will debating China for years to come. As Martin Jacques said in his When China Rules the World: ‘if the 19th century belonged to Britain and the 20th century belonged to America then the 21st century will belong to China’.

Bill Bonnar is a member of the editorial committee of Scottish Left Review.
Jimmy Reid’s words still echo on education

David Watt explains the work of the Socialist Educational Association Scotland

Jimmy Reid’s rectorial speech of nearly fifty years ago continues to challenge the role of Scottish education. He spoke of the challenge of eradicating poverty, the place of communities and the negative centralising nature of national governments. He set an agenda not yet attained. In terms of the purpose of education, he nailed it: ‘If automation and technology is accompanied as it must be with full employment, then the leisure time available to humanity will be enormously increased. If that is so, then our whole concept of education must change. The whole object must be to educate people for life, not solely for work or a profession’.

Part of the role of the Socialist Educational Association Scotland (SEAS) is to attempt to persuade the Scottish Labour Party to adopt education policies that will respond to that ongoing challenge. Reid used the language of social justice and applied human rights terms to education, saying; ‘I am convinced that the great mass of our people go through life without a glimmer of what they could have contributed to their fellow human beings. This is a personal tragedy. It is a social crime. The flowering of each individual’s personality and talents is the precondition for everyone’s development’.

In 2000, the Scottish Parliament placed into Scots law the human rights version of Reid’s words with the purpose of education provided by local authorities to be for ‘the development of the personality, talents and mental and physical abilities of the child or young person to their fullest potential’. The SEAS argues that the human rights agenda can now go further and not just the individual must benefit through education. Social justice demands that realising the potential of the individual must also be measured by the potential for the benefit to all.

Recently, the SEAS has been active in contributing to Scottish Labour’s policy consultation arguing for better outcomes for all involved in education and for achieving a more socially just and inclusive society in Scotland. This requires collaborative and collective work within communities. Labour must ask: ‘Is Curriculum for Excellence (CFE) changing the whole concept of education? Is Scottish Education educating people for life and the benefit of society, or is it still heading down the cul de sac of passing exams for personal benefit?’

A new form of municipal socialism must position councils at the heart of a social justice agenda working cooperatively throughout local communities. The SEAS recognises the potential of more curricular decisions at schools level and the development of good practice arising from flexibility in CFE. A school’s autonomy needs to be accountable within its community but also through the democratically elected local authority. Holyrood has to avoid bureaucratic and centralised approaches. Jimmy Reid’s view, even decades ago was: ‘The power of local authorities has been and is being systematically undermined. The justification I can see for local government is as a counter-balance to the centralised character of national government’. It is just as bad today.

The SEAS argues for education to provide a platform for change, becoming ‘lifelong learning towards the inclusive society based on values of social justice and challenging disadvantage’, in contrast to a stagnating and struggling education system under the present Scottish Government which is fixated on testing children and attempting to marginalise democratically elected local authorities.

SEAS calls for early investment throughout Scotland in high-quality child development provision to match that already provided in many local authority nursery schools and early years centres. Early childhood development experiences would benefit from disputes around staff structures, education, training and experience being resolved by focusing on the creation of the best provision to meet children’s wrap-around learning needs and care. In the early years, focus should be on learning through play rather than schooling and readiness for school.

The SEAS argues that the social justice agenda must focus on inclusiveness and equality in education. If Scotland is serious about incorporating human rights for children, then children or young people with disabilities or in care cannot continue to be discriminated against. The failure to provide adequate staffing, resources and planning has strengthened the argument against the presumption of mainstreaming. Inclusive education is a vital part of educational change. It will need to be planned for, resourced and implemented much more proactively.

Embedding equality education has allegedly been a priority since 2014, but tackling stereotyping and challenging discrimination through equality education is still not embedded in CFE. SEAS argues for equality issues to be in the mainstream topics of every subject area as with gender stereotyping but also across characteristics of belief, social class, disability, ethnicity and sexual orientation.

Finally, the SEAS is keen to see the end of private schooling. The promotion of inequality and social injustice is buttressed by selective schooling based on social status and money. Private schools have been requesting and receiving support from public bodies, but the SNP Government refuses to own up to the extent of support. The SEAS resolution carried by Scottish Labour’s 2019 conference demands the end of direct subsidy by taxpayers and an end to indirect support by various resources of public bodies and government.

For the SEAS, education is more than school, college or university attainment. We have to provide better than simply a personal meritocratic approach. Education has a role in tackling all forms of inequality but the cause of increasing numbers of children living in poverty is obviously not primarily educational. Rebuilding a fair society can only be carried out by coordinated action at national and local government level focused through community action. However, education has a vital role in the changes that society needs and the SEAS regrets that promoting social justice and tackling inequality is not yet at the centre of the educational purpose for Scottish Labour.

David Watt is the Secretary of the Socialist Educational Association Scotland (https://seascotland.blog), the educational affiliate of the Scottish Labour Party.
Moira Craig says experience of public services for the young would pay democratic dividends

One of the most important decisions which we make as we approach adult life is which job we would like to have or which profession we would like to join. No matter which it is, we will expect that it will be preceded by a spell of training and, indeed, that it might require us to obtain a professional qualification before we are accepted or even considered for a post. There are no professions and, indeed, few occupations where people do not have to provide proof that they have the ability and the training to be accepted. Unfortunately, this does not apply to those who wish to be Members of Parliament for MP’s are not trained for the job - despite the fact that they have the salaries and expenses which give them an upper middle-class income. Sadly, although some in Labour have for many years argued against this form of crony capitalism, Labour has done little to correct this phenomenon and have not stopped their own Westminster MPs from frequently employing relatives and from misusing the expenses system.

While British MPs are not trained for their job, voters are not trained for their task and tend to cast their votes for the party whose policy appeals but without understanding the tasks which are involved and the judgements which MPs must make and, indeed, without having a clear knowledge of the effects which their decisions will have on society as a whole. This lack of understanding probably explains why such a large percentage of registered voters do not vote - a fact which is not presently included in election results. If we show how many of the registered voters did not vote as well as those who did we have a clearer version of electors wishes. Thus, in 2015 General Election, 34% of registered voters did not vote. The Tories won with votes from 24% of registered voters, 20% voted Labour, 8.3% voted UKIP, 5.2% voted Liberal Democrat, 3.1% voted SNP and 2.5% Green.

The Scottish Parliament is, of course, more democratic mainly because all MSPs have the opportunity to participate in the committee system in which they can have a certain amount of cross-party cooperation and a clearer understanding of public needs than Westminster MPs. Unfortunately, the debating chamber still allows them to spend much time on cross party insults which they feel is necessary if they are to keep their jobs.

Scotland is a small country but has many widely different physical aspects and communities which do not regularly travel from their home environment to learn about the variety in life experiences of their fellow Scots. Geography and History classes within our schools do not necessarily spend much time on Scotland and, indeed, many Scots also seem unaware that we have a distinctive legal system. If we understand the need to have both those elected to parliament, and those who elected them, to have an understanding of their country and how it is run and should be run we must ensure that our present education system is sensibly revised to ensure that children are made aware of the widely different geography, history and lifestyles which exist in their country.

So, we should introduce the following as essential civic education. Starting in the third year of secondary school, individual pupils should spend one day per month working for the national and local government services of the areas in which they live - education, health, transport, emergency services etc. They should continue to work one day per month throughout their schooldays and any post-school education in colleges or universities but also throughout their working lives when they would begin to have experience of other areas in their country.

As the voting age in Scotland has been reduced from 18 years to 16 years, it is singularly appropriate that we should ensure that these young voters should have the opportunity to develop a clearer understanding of the different needs of the various populations within their country and enable them to make a more intelligent estimation of government practice than has been possible for past generations.

Parents and grandparents who have been asked about their views on this proposal for an extension of the educational experience into the wider society have been enthusiastic in their approval, and the general view which they have expressed was that young people would appreciate and enjoy this process as it would give them a clearer insight into how society is run and how it might be improved. The impression was also given that the parents and grandparents would rather like to have had this experience themselves. Over time, it might well be possible, therefore, to have a volunteer scheme to allow older voters to participate.

Moira Craig is a former educational psychologist

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The Public (2019),
writer and director: Emilio Estevez
Reviewed by Jackie Bergson
With an endearing central performance by Emilio Estevez, who also wrote and directed this independent drama film and with a Hollywood cast including Alec Baldwin, Jena Malone, Taylor Schilling, Jeffrey Wright and Christian Slater, The Public is bound to reach a broad audience demographic. The film tackles the subjects of homelessness and civil rights within society - corpus debates held in micro-cosmic focus.

A modern fable without didactic conclusions, The Public makes current and historical references to John Steinbeck and Wall Street. In an intelligent nod to Roman civilisation BC, private-seeming news about a recently deceased homeless man named Caesar is grandly discussed by his compatriots while they wash and brush up in the men’s room of Cincinnati Public Library. Ironic use of the Roman colossus’s name in this context is fascinating, because in his time, Julius Caesar proposed a law to redistribute public lands to the poor. This subtext suggests to us that the term ‘homeless’ neither equates to nor implies uncharitable or uninformed.

More glitzy than Ken Loach’s examination of Britain’s welfare state in both the seminal drama Kathy Come Home (1966) and three decades later, I, Daniel Blake (2016), Estevez’s The Public avoids the welfare debate completely. Instead, it conveys ideas about how society and individuals act and strive to resolve the toxic reality of homelessness. This film is deceptively simple in its portrayal of civilisation in conflict: policing, rules and regulations; family ties; morality; mental health; physical needs; institutional needs – somehow it manages to brightly reflect what could more or less be viewed as the depressing subject of a good man on the verge of being pushed back towards a homeless state under threat of losing his job. Homeless women are not in particular focus, for reasons not strained by explanation in the film.

A brief oration about climate change to library manager, Stuart Goodson (Estevez), delivered by his colleague Myra (Jena Malone) under the watch of a giant, stuffed polar bear in the background, and also the presence of national versus interactive broadcast media, afford a now-and-happening feel to The Public. Its central subject matter is news about the library’s invasion by homeless people, which initially carries as much skewed significance as the glamorous on-the-scene TV reporter (Gabrielle Union) affords it. She begins by hyping the idea that Goodson is unbalanced due to his unstable background and that he is holding homeless people hostage in the library where he works. As the film progresses, her critical discourse changes to admiration, as Goodson takes instinctive control of his channel’s audience by using his mobile phone to truthfully film events as they unfold inside the library. Adding an even sweeter note to the story, homeless street orator, Jackson (Michael Kenneth Williams), and library boss, Anderson (Jeffrey Wright), become surprising allies and brothers in arms to the beleaguered Goodson.

Estevez was inspired to make this film after he read a news article about a real-life event: ‘... I read a Los Angeles Times article that was written by a former librarian about how the libraries have become de facto homeless shelters and how librarians had become social workers ... on a daily basis, they would have to call emergency services about people who collapsed or had an overdose or diabetic comas ... it’s the last bastion of democracy in action. I was so moved by the article and what I saw, having spent so much time at the public library, I decided to start researching for a new movie’.

His central character, Goodson, is unquestionably decent and lovable good guy who possesses flaws and heart-breaking reasons for his tolerant, good-humoured kinship with the homeless revolutionaries in his film. The fact that his building manager at home (Taylor Schilling) is evidently thrilled by him whatever his circumstances adds a deservingly romantic touch. By contrasting Goodson’s actions with those of Detective Bill Ramstead (Alec Baldwin), we bear witness to...
individual components involved within the thorny subject of homelessness. Undiluted cynicism, represented in the form of prosecution attorney, Josh Davis (Christian Slater), who on behalf of the Library Board attempts to form a legal case against Goodson, adds edgy intrigue to the film’s plot and subtext.

The Public is clear on the cynical use of poverty as an industry for lawyers like Davis to feed from. Through diverse perspectives of authority, individualism and solidarity, the film’s overarching, political stand becomes evident. This is a gem of a film and well worth seeing.

Jackie Bergson has worked in the voluntary sector and commercial business development in technology and creative sectors. Educated in and living in Glasgow, her political and social views chime left-of-centre.

Alexander Trocchi: An intriguing writer
Sean Sheehan reviews a number of Trocchi’s key works

Glasgow-born Alexander Trocchi was a fiery figure in the British literary world – an editor in Paris, an avant-garde novelist with an internationalist mindset – before he parked himself in a desolate London siding labelled ‘obscure heroin-addicted ex-writer’. With new editions of his writing now published, the time is ripe to look again at this iconoclastic Scotsman who died in 1984.

Cain’s Book (1963) brings to mind William Burrough’s Naked Lunch, sharing an unashamed depiction of their similar subject matter. The narrator, cooking up some heroin, thinks to himself: ‘a small fix, I feel, would recreate the strewn ramparts of Jericho’. Walls in the mind, stabilizing boundaries between the self and the world, have been blown down, not by trumpets of rams’ horns but by an unendurable ennui and unfulfilled need that becomes overwhelming. When the effect of a fix wears off, what is said of a fellow addict becomes a self-description: ‘all grace dies within him. He becomes a dead thing. For him, ordinary consciousness is like a slow desert at the centre of his being’. Heroin is ‘a murmured orgasm in the bloodstream’ but the habit, he notes, is a religion where the believer is the only member of the church.

In The Holy Man and Other Stories, the characters in the four stories are not addicts but they are marginalized people with lives private to themselves, beyond the ken of others and probably outside their own understanding as well. In one of them, ‘Peter Pierce’, a man needs a temporary hideaway from the police and takes lodging in a house where he befriends a tramp-like rag picker called Peter. Like a character from Beckett, Peter obsesses over the trivial, in this case pen nibs (these stories were written in the 1950s) and his strange existence is the story’s point of interest.

Even stranger is the lodger in the collection’s titular story, a recluse who mystifies the other inhabitants in a shabby Paris dwelling house above a disused bar. Never leaving his darkened room on the top floor, fed and minimally cared for by two women who live below him, he acquires an aura more usually associated with anchorites. His fellow lodgers wait, as if for a theophany. The central character in another one of the stories, ‘The Meeting’, does at least have dreams of a more fulfilling life than the one offered by his current predicament. Working in an office in post-WW2 Britain – ‘I thought it would be different after the war. But it’s not, it’s the same. Worse, if anything.’ – something beckons as a possibility of escape from his demeaning existence when he goes for an after work drink with female colleague, Miss Lanelly.

Young Adam was Trocchi’s first novel, first published in 1954, two years after he moved to Paris, and tells the story of Joe, a disengaged young itinerant, who is working on a barge connecting Edinburgh and Glasgow. He helps Les, whose wife Ella owns the barge, and one day the two men find the corpse of an undressed woman drifting in the water. The tone of the novel’s prose – explicit and disquieting – is apparent in the opening paragraph: ‘These are times when what is to be said looks out of the past at you – looks out like someone at a window and you in the street as you walk along. Past hours, past acts, take on an uncanny isolation; between them and you who look back on them now there is no continuity’.

The discovery of the dead woman is followed by Joe’s awakening of sexual interest in Ella and his furtive seduction is initiated under the table in the cramped barge as the husband reads a paper in front of them over breakfast. A conjunction of sex and death threads its way through the novel, mostly through the optic of Joe’s free-ranging libido and his disturbing dispassionateness.

It is the way Joe, as much an outsider as the characters in his other novel and short stories, recounts his experience that makes Young Adam an intriguing read. This is lost in the 2003 film version, with Ewan McGregor playing Joe, though Tilda Swinton as Ella adds a woman’s perspective that is not always obvious in Trocchi’s writing. Alexander Trocchi’s work stands on its own ground. The new publication of his two novels and four short stories is to be welcomed, offering a fresh opportunity for readers to discover the writing of one of Scotland’s best writers of the twentieth century. Cain’s Book has an interesting forward by Tom McCarthy and Man at Leisure, a collection of his lesser-known writing, includes an introduction by William Burroughs. All books mentioned are published by Alma Books (https://almabooks.com/alma-author/alexander-trocchi/).

Seldom in recent memory has there been a bigger disconnect between voters and their elected politicians than the current contest to elect the next Prime Minister of Britain. Like the most uninspiring final of X-Factor ever, the Tory leadership race has been whittled down to just two contestants. I never thought this country would ever have a worse Prime Minister than Theresa May. In terms of incompetence, and lack of charisma, she is a tough act to follow. However, looking at the remaining candidates, the next episode of ‘Nightmare on Downing Street’ may be even more horrific.

The choice the voters have is clear. It’s either the pathological liar or the complete non-entity. By ‘voters’, I mean members of the Conservative Party. Therefore, the number of people in Scotland having a say in the election of our next Prime Minister would struggle to fill the top deck of a bus. North Korea and China are two contestants. I never thought this race has been whittled down to just two contestants. I never tire of punching. [Editor’s note: I dread to think what an insufferable piece of shit he became after snorting a couple of lines of Colombian marching powder.]

First, we had Michael Gove admitting that he had taken cocaine on a number of occasions twenty-odd years. At the very time, he was writing articles denouncing drug use in The Times. Put aside the man’s obvious hypocrisy for a minute, if you will. The revelation he took cocaine conjures up some deeply disturbing images. One of the worst aspects of that particular drug, aside from its potential health risks, is that it turns the sweetest of people into absolute monsters. I have known very self-effacing wallflowers turn into loud-mouthed egocentric bores after a very small amount of the stuff.

I find Michael Gove to be a particularly loathsome, individual at the best of times. He has a face no-one would ever tire of punching. [Editor’s comment after Jo Brand’s joke about throwing battery acid not milkshakes: take that as you wish]. I dread to think what an insufferable piece of shit he became after snorting a couple of lines of Colombian marching powder.

Finally, we had Rory Stewart, who claimed to have smoked opium when he was in Afghanistan. The opium revelation pretty much explains everything else about Rory Stewart, in particular his eccentricity which at times bordered on outright lunacy. To be honest, I’m not sure that the guy is actually real. He does not look entirely like a normal human being. His mouth has far too many teeth for a start and is too big for his face. None of his suits seem to fit properly. He puts me in a mind of a ventriloquist’s dummy.

For decades now, successive governments have been running campaigns trying to get the youth of the country not to take drugs. Every one of these has been a failure. However, if there were any better evidence that drugs aren’t cool, it’s the fact these guys took them. They should maybe all feature in the next public service broadcast. ‘Don’t do drugs, kids. Do you really want up to end up like Michael Gove?’ However, if Boris wins, I reckon just about everyone, Tories included, will soon be reaching for the strongest drugs available.

Tickets for Vladimir McTavish’s 2019 Edinburgh Fringe show ‘60 Minutes to Save The World’ are on sale now on www.thestand.co.uk

Vladimir McTavish
ASLEF CALLS FOR AN INTEGRATED, PUBLICLY OWNED, ACCOUNTABLE RAILWAY FOR SCOTLAND

(which used to be the SNP’s position – before they became the government!)

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