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Like many others, Scottish Left Review is outraged at the attack on democracy represented by prorogation and condemns this extended suspension of Parliament to allow for a no-deal Brexit to be forced through without any parliamentary scrutiny or the opportunity for parliamentary opposition. Scottish Left Review supports initiatives to mobilise citizens outside of Parliament to confront this anti-democratic outrage. We call on all opposition MPs and Tory MPs who believe in parliamentary democracy to join together to defeat this outrage. All the articles in this issue (bar Kick up the Tabloids) were written before the prorogation on 28 August 2019.

I t has long been a shibboleth on the radical left, following from Marx and Engels, that politics in the last instance bends to the will of economics. This is because capitalism – the system we have lived under for over 150 years – is a fundamentally about pursuit of profit. Politics is merely an expression of this and there to facilitate it. And yet, it seems politics is trumping – no pun intended – economics at the moment. We have a now dominant political faction of the Tory party intent upon delivering a ‘hard’ Brexit – actual or via a ‘no deal’ – in order to deliver upon its long-held goal of regaining much British political sovereignty from the EU. And yet the major representatives of capital, like the CBI, vehemently oppose this. Even if a new found economic nirvana is to be gained, there will be a lot of pain and disruption before it is arrived at. So, how to explain this conundrum? Are Boris Johnson, Jacob Rees-Mogg etc ‘anti-capitalists’ – even of a reactionary nature? Or, are they the representatives of a particular fraction of the capitalist class?

Who will benefit from Brexit?

In the lead article in this issue, George Kerevan explains this perplexing situation because he examines the fractions – maybe factions - of capital that exist at the moment. Those that will economically benefit from EU withdrawal are what he calls the ‘Del boy’ capitalists – the Aaron Banks, James Dysons and Tim Martins of this world – and they are bankrolling the political reactionaries who believe in a particularly virulent form of British (maybe just English) nationalism. Together, they have created a new form of right-wing populism. They seek to have a ‘people versus the politicians’ general election to either bring about their preferred type of Brexit or cement it after it the deed is done. Those on the left that supported – and still support - withdrawal need to wake up to the manifest reality of this intention.

Returning to the radical left (and Karl and Frederick), another shibboleth is that capitalism – and its politics – is full of contradictions. This is certainly true as Boris seems to be prepared to engage in Keynesian-style reflation to try to aid him in a general election and prevent any economic meltdown following Brexit. Pragmatism of both an economic and political sort then? In the grand scheme of things, Johnson is a neo-liberal but his is also an opportunist. He has not been a longstanding ardent ‘leaver’. He is more recent convert. What particular political capital he has - compared to Theresa May - is that he would have a better chance of selling to the Brexiteers a deal that she couldn’t - being one that falls short of their maximum programme. He sees himself as a disruptor for a supercharged neo-liberal project. His bombastic, bumbling buffoonery is but a cover for this dark project which includes bringing in more private companies to deliver public services and deregulating the workplace. It is the new form of right-wing populism which under cuts the Brexit party in order to bolster the Tories. In this issue, Peter Lynch lays out the personnel resources Johnson is now calling upon to bring this project to fruition, showing that it is about much more than just Brexit. All this shows that this August has not been the normal ‘silly season’ where formal politics takes a break and newspapers chase inane stories to fill their front pages in order to make up for the shortfall in ‘hard’ news.

The other sides of the on-going crisis in politics in Britain, of course, involve Labour, LibDems and the SNP. New LibDem leader, Jo Swinson, does not to care that she seems to have overplayed her hand by saying that the official leader of the opposition does not have first call on being the caretaker prime minister if Johnson and his government lose a motion of confidence, prorogue parliament or suffer a major legislative
setback (like the revoking of Article 50). She’s been rather illiberal and undemocratic in doing so – but this is because she’s putting her party’s interest first and foremost. In terms of MPs, the Lib Dems are so far back from the ‘I agree with Nick (Clegg)’ times of 2010 – because of their backsliding on student fees and the like – that they are prepared to do anything and everything in order to help turn their new found popularity into more MPs. We should, of course, recall that the Lib Dems were co-parents of austerity and Swinson was the Social Security minister who introduced Universal Credit and the bedroom tax.

Meantime, Labour continues to get a ‘sore arse’ by sitting as many different ways as possible on the Brexit fence. It’s understandable given the split over Brexit amongst its core supporters. But it would have been far better to have declared a crystal-clear position – whatever that may have been – take the inevitable, short-term hit and then move on to campaigning on that position instead of ever grudgingly changing on shifting sands. Polling wise, Labour has gone from being quite well ahead to quite well behind on account of the Boris bounce. But how long will that last? And, there are dangers for Labour if it seeks to lead a government of national unity. Political unity is not possible at the moment. Class unity is not desirable at any time. For example, who would be in the driving seat to determine the nature and purpose of any subsequent referendum?

Talking of polling and bounces, has the SNP finally got its beloved prize? The first poll showing a 52:48 margin for independence has emerged – it seems on account of not just Brexit but a ‘no deal’ Brexit. Again, will this last? And, why did it take so long and should the margin not be much higher? There is discontent within the SNP on the leadership’s chosen slowly-slowly strategy (hence, interest in Angus McNeill’s ‘plan B’). Much here depends upon not just Labour in London but Labour in Edinburgh. It’s been another torrid time for Scottish Labour, especially on the issue of independence. Asked many questions in an interview during the Edinburgh festival, John McDonnell responded to one by saying Labour Westminster government would not reject a request from the Scottish Parliament for a Section 30 order to allow another referendum. Corbyn repeated this – again adding that Labour would campaign for a ‘no’ vote. Yet Richard Leonard simplistically responded by saying Labour should concentrate on Brexit and austerity and not on independence – as if the former had no bearing on the latter and vice-versa. The irony of this is that McDonnell and Corbyn were only saying what they had said three years ago and it was Scottish Labour’s position that is contrary to the Claim of Right which Labour signed up to. On the day of prorogation, a compromise was announced by Scottish and British Labour, whereby a Section 30 order would not be granted in the ‘formative’ years of a Labour Westminster government.

**FEEDBACK: Fascism and the far right**

There are few things more important to the working-class movement than responding to the threat of fascism. Cry ‘fascist’ at every right-wing politician and there’s a danger of missing the real thing. Ignore the risk and then the potential horrors of Nazi Germany await. Neil Davidson (Scottish Left Review Jul/Aug 2019) provided a useful reminder: don’t overemphasise the threat of fascism while underplaying the menace of right-wing populism. He was correct to make a distinction between right-wing populist, Nigel Farage, and fascist, Tommy Robinson. However, it is also important to recognise what they have in common.

Since the financial crash of 2008/2009, politicians from the liberal-centre to the far right have targeted immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers are those responsible for the need to carry through austerity. So, crude racism via ’divide and rule’ has been the cover through which policies have been pushed forward to transfer wealth from the poorest with the aim of restoring profitability.

This has been used by both the far right and fascist organisations to win support. When Trump tells congresswomen of colour in the US ‘to go back to their own country’, he emboldens the alt-right. When Johnston calls black people ‘picaninnies’ and describes Muslim women as ‘looking like letterboxes’, he provides an excuse for far-right thugs to target Muslims, immigrants or asylum seekers. His election as Tory leader and, thus, Prime Minister, will boost Islamophobes and racists.

Neil is also right to point out that one of the ‘defining characteristics of fascism is to seek the destruction of working-class organisations’ and ‘The non-fascist hard right’ are ‘primarily electoral’. However, that is not the end of the matter. Recently, in International Socialism, David Albright described the current approach of fascist organisations as ‘Hitler’s strategy reversed’. He points out: ‘Today fascists are already strong in Parliament. Some are even part of Governments as in Austria, but they have issues building on the streets’. Does this make them any less dangerous?

In Austria, the fascist FPÖ formed a government with the right-wing, Austrian People’s Party, and fascist parties have won significant votes in Germany (AFD 12.6% 2017), Hungary (Jobbik 19.06% 2017), Sweden (Swedish Democrats 17.53% 2018) and in France in 2017, the National Rally/Front won 34% of votes in the presidential run-off. There are a number of reasons for the failure of fascists forces to dominate the streets, not least of which they have to confront opposition from anti-racists and anti-fascists. However, while modern fascist organisations try to mask their actual intentions, there is plenty of evidence - in their speeches and literature - this is superficial, their glorification of past Nazi practices and their intention to move to a more ‘revolutionary phase’.

Nor should we be complacent about the present threat. We have seen anti-immigrant rioting by far-right forces in Chemnitz last August, 51 killed in a terrorist attack on a Christchurch mosque and the massacre of 11 people in a Pittsburgh synagogue. In Britain, the Football Lads Alliance and Democratic Football Alliance have mobilised thousands on the basis of anti-Muslim bigotry.

Alongside Syriza’s downfall, there was some good news. Golden Dawn lost all its 21 MPs, largely as a result of the anti-fascist organisation, KEEFA, working with the anti-racists and anti-fascists across Greece. Tommy Robinson stood in the European elections, believing it was possible to win a seat. A campaign organised by Stand Up to Racism in alliance with unions and anti-racist groups in the north-west England limited Robinson’s vote to just 2%. Nevertheless, we cannot be complacent - the threat of the far right and fascism remains serious.

Bob Fotheringham is a member of the Socialist Workers Party in Scotland
When Boris Johnson’s political obituary is finally written, you can bet it will contain the infamous quote which said: ‘F*ck business’. But how could a senior bourgeois politician, vying for the leadership of the world’s oldest ruling class political party, denounce the very capitalist interests the Conservative Party was traditionally supposed to represent?

The answer is that Brexit is the crucible in which the ancient ruling class bloc that heretofore has represented British capitalism is being re-forged. EU membership, which was meant to provide new markets for British industry following the demise of Empire, has proven a cul-de-sac for every sector except City finance (which originally opposed joining). Britain runs a permanent and growing manufacturing trade deficit with the EU. Some 27% of all British businesses employing over 250 workers are now foreign-owned, with well over half of those European hands. Exploiting Britain is now a prime source of EU, US and foreign profits.

This underlying economic crisis has provoked a related but separate crisis in how British capitalism maintains hegemony over society. The result is a massive convulsion in British politics, in the internal relationships between different sectors of ruling class itself, and above all in the functioning of the dominant Conservative Party. Brexit is not the primary cause of these developments, but it is the outward form in which ruling class divisions are being played out.

Karl Marx in his London exile was the first to explore the complex inner political relationships of the oldest capitalist society on the planet. British capitalism was uniquely pre-industrial, based on market-driven agriculture and City-funded foreign trade in the period after the English Civil War. Here the Tory Party emerged as representative of the new agricultural landlord class: the former feudal aristocracy whose financial interests were now centred on ground rent. Perpetually ranged against the Tories were the Whigs, representatives of the tight oligarchy of senior aristocratic families, such as the Devonshires and Bedrooms. The Whig oligarchy sought to maintain monopoly of control of the government and the military machine, whose patronage protected their wealth (which is the origin of the relative autonomy and elitist culture of Whitehall to this day.)

As the nineteenth century progressed, this ruling class duopoly was challenged by the rise of an industrial middle class and by the world’s first mass proletariat. Politically, this clash took place around 1) the demand of the new industrial bourgeoisie for free trade (hence, the repeal of the protectionist Corn Laws); and 2) working class Chartist demands for universal suffrage. The outcome settled politics for the rest of the century. The Corn Laws were repealed, and the industrial bourgeoisie granted the vote. In return for these concessions, the newly enfranchised industrial middle class feebly accepted a permanent, political condominium with the landed interest – it was a safer option than unleashing the proletariat. But male working-class suffrage was denied till 1918. Women waited even longer.

Britain would remain a curious constitutional fossil in which the industrial bourgeoisie failed conspicuously to take a monopoly of political power – contrary to Marx’s confident mid-century predictions. As a result, British capitalism would fall behind America in creating a modern state geared to its own interests. Hence, a century of relative economic decline. The persistence of this ancient regime has been the subject of much debate on the British left, famously in the pages of New Left Review. While there is a core truth contained in this analysis, British decline provoked repeated conflicts and realignments within the ruling bloc. It is these conflicts which – if belatedly – are now coming to a resolution.

For example, the successor to the Whigs, the Liberal Party, first morphed into the political representative of the big industrial bourgeoisie; then it split again after the rise of the Labour Party, with the main industrial faction fusing with the Tories. The ruling bloc underwent yet another reorganisation after WW2. British industry had remained organised in small family firms – undercapitalised, badly managed and increasingly unable to compete with giant American and German rivals focused on mass production. With the loss of imperial markets after 1945, British manufacturing capital faced Armageddon. The solution was state ownership of coal, railways and steel, which paid off private capital with taxpayers’ money. A second wave of high-tech nationalisations followed under Harold Wilson and Edward Heath, involving aviation, Rolls Royce, computers, cars and shipbuilding.

The ultimate aim was to create economies of scale to allow manufacturing industry to conquer new European markets once Britain entered the EU (then called the EEC – European Economic Community). As a result of this state capitalism, the bourgeois managers of nationalised firms emerged as a key stratum in ruling class power. Figures such as Michael Edwardes, boss of British Leyland, and Lord Robens, head of the National Coal Board, became influential players in this state-industry nexus. But it proved to be the last throw of the dice for the industrial bourgeoisie in Britain. A new political bloc would emerge post-Thatcher. The roots of this new bloc lie in Thatcher’s privatisation programme.

State capitalism succeeded in consolidating and re-capitalising British manufacturing. Thatcher now sold these assets back into private ownership for a song. In the process, a new bourgeois layer emerged bent on making a quick buck from trading shares or buying and selling assets – much as Russian oligarchs would do after the fall of Communism in 1989. The era of ‘Del boy’ capitalism had arrived, aided by Thatcher’s simultaneous deregulation of the City and Gordon Brown’s later tax concessions for ‘non-doms’. Sociologically, this upstart bourgeoisie was drawn mainly from outside the traditional Oxbridge or City
elite. Arron Banks is the son of an expat sugar plantation manager while Nigel Farage’s peripatetic father was a failed stockbroker turned antiques dealer. The ‘Del boy’ class made its living in fringe financial wheeling and dealing – Banks by insuring commercial white vans and Farage by selling junk bonds. This stratum learned to hate the traditional bourgeois establishment.

Land ownership (with its rental income) would also make a comeback post-Thatcher. The literal massacre of the English yeoman officer class on the fields of Flanders virtually annihilated the traditional Tory rural bourgeoisie. But since Thatcher, British governments have sold off a massive 2m hectares of public land - a staggering 10% of the entire land area of Britain. Result: while 30% of all land in England is still held by the traditional Whig aristocracy, a staggering 40% is now owned by anonymous corporations, foreign oligarchs and nouveau riche financiers. This has created new political interests.

Consider pro-Brexit tycoon, James Dyson. He has spent the last few years on a massive land buying spree. His Beeswax Farming company controls 33,000 acres of prime English farmland, making Dyson the biggest farmer in the country. Why has Dyson bought up all this land? Certainly, he rakes in public subsidies. But the core reason is that Dyson’s investment in farmland is a way to avoid inheritance tax. Oligarchs like Dyson are frantic to deregulate land control and cut taxes, as a bolt hole for their new wealth. Any agency that smacks of regulation (i.e. the EU) is, to him, an enemy.

These new ‘Del boy’ capitalists aren’t interested in long term investment. Consequently, privatised industry has again been abandoned to foreign ownership (hence, support for the EU). Instead, domestic British capitalism accumulates using financial speculation. A look at who funded the ‘Leave’ campaign and Boris Johnson’s leadership bid reveals the prominence of a splinter group of finance capitalists who operate so-called ‘hedge funds’. They include Crispin Odey of Odey Asset Management and Johan Christofferson of Christofferson, Robb and Co. Their interest in Brexit has everything to do with escaping new EU regulation, ending central bank quantitative easing (which favours conventional bond holders) and returning to a more libertarian (‘chaotic’) economic system in which they can make money by shorting the market. Here lies the genesis of a new ruling class bloc.

So, Brexit is not a cry for help from the English underclass. It is a carefully stage-managed campaign orchestrated in particular by hedge fund billionaires and fringe speculators like Arron Banks manoeuvring to seize the state for their own profit.

Traditionally, the British ruling class and its attendant national culture are an ideology free zone. This is the result of the failure of any social revolution from below to challenge - never mind destroy - the ‘eternal’ edifice of British capitalism. But the new hedge fund insurgents need to explain why they are intent on a radical break with Europe and with the pro-EU hegemony of the City, CBI and Whitehall-Oxford-BBC establishment. This ideological project takes the form of an extreme anti-state libertarianism. Consider puckish Steve Baker MP, the technological brains behind the ‘Leave’ campaign and chair of the ultra-Brexit, European Research Group. Baker is a conscious radical libertarian who hates traditional conservatism. He’s an entrist who sees Brexit as the hammer to destroy the failed, corrupt British establishment and start a revolution to reverse British capitalist decline.

Classical libertarianism eschews nationalism, advocating open borders and freedom of lifestyle. Yet Trumpism and the pro-Brexit bloc are extreme nationalists, anti-Muslim and anti-immigration. How is this contradiction squared? Pro-Trump and pro-Brexit ‘libertarians’ theorise that you can only risk abolishing state regulation if there is a commonality of culture among the citizenry. And defending a common culture requires curbing immigration. Of course, this ‘libertarian nationalism’ is thinly disguised racism – but a racism that allows the new ‘Del boy’ capitalists to mobilise a mass base among the de-classed, worried pensioners and threatened petty bourgeoisie.

Can this new ruling class bloc solidify? On one side, the pro-Brexit ‘Del boys’ represent a precariously narrow social base. Their success arises from the weakness of the left, the complacency of their bourgeois opponents and the decline of British industrial capital. Their petty English nationalism seems oblivious to the centrifugal forces a ‘hard’ Brexit will unleash in the Celtic fringes. And, their financial interests are at odds with the needs of what remains of industrial capital. Alternatively, ‘Del Boy’ speculators have nothing against Chancellor Javid (an ex-derivatives salesman) abandoning austerity in favour of a massive borrowing and spending spree. It could buy Boris victory in a general election.

Yet the thing about speculators is they are apt to gamble too far. There’s a global recession in the offing and the working class won’t remain quiescent. This time, the ruling class is deeply divided. Let’s keep it that way. If Labour gets to power, it should ban ‘shorting’ in shares and regulate hedge funds out of existence. And, it should impose a hefty wealth tax on big land ownership. A new ruling bloc has yet to crystallise. Let’s prevent it ever happening.

George Kerevan is the National Convenor of the SNP Socialists group and a former SNP MP.
The revolution of radical reactionaries?

Peter Lynch dissects the new cabinet of BoJo after the night of the long knives

It’s hard to know where to start with the Johnson cabinet. Its ideological contours and intentions are very clear in the short term in relation to Brexit, crime and immigration. But, we’re not only unsure how long this government will last, we’re also looking at something ideologically-hybrid when we contrast its composition with its initial policy concerns: a cabinet of tax-cutting, state-shrinkers, committed to increased spending on the NHS, policing, prisons and schools. It’s also a cabinet committed to publicly-funded infrastructure but politically nervous about HS2 and Heathrow expansion and the electoral damage they could do to Conservative MPs and party prospects in target seats.

The last few weeks have seen an online onslaught by the Tories in three of these areas (education is still to come) whilst also campaigning on Brexit, free ports, knife-crime and seeking to increase party membership and gather as much data - and email addresses - about voter attitudes as they can. Johnson’s personality, campaigning capacity and media projection have been central to this, but so too has picking the right topics and eye-catching messages. He has sparked the party back into life and given them some direction following May’s floundering on the domestic front.

So, ideology, meets pragmatic spending pledges - and in turn - meets campaign-preparation. This isn’t so unusual when you think about it, as parties balance ideological and policy commitments at every turn when in government. But this cabinet has taken a pronounced turn to the right, to reinvigorate the Tory grassroots and reattach Brexit Party supporters to the Conservatives. However, it’s self-aware enough to realise it needs to spend - or at least appear to spend - on key public services in order to attract voters and campaign on something other than Brexit.

It’s worth making three general points about the new cabinet. First, this cabinet has learned some things from the last few years about unity – May’s cabinet was bedevilled by instability, internal opposition and planned resignations over Brexit. So, Johnson’s cabinet composition has limited internal opposition significantly, rewarded friends and punished enemies. Opponents have been banished and there are few remnants from May’s cabinet whether they were pro-Remain or pro-Leave if they hadn’t supported Johnson in the leadership contest. Amber Rudd at the DWP stands out as a counter-example which we can see as the government’s attempt to keep revising lain Duncan Smith’s war on the poor and disabled through Universal Credit and benefit cuts.

Third, it would appear that this cabinet will be a lot less liberal than May’s last cabinet. The more liberal justice and housing policies from Gauke and Brokenshire’s periods in office will disappear, to be replaced by a hard line on crime and policing and perhaps in other policy areas too.

Another way to understand the ideological positioning of the new cabinet is to look beyond the Ministers themselves to the Special Advisors (SPADs) - who have been chosen and why? Here we find Dominic Cummings and Damon Poole of Vote Leave, Chloe Westley and Blair Gibbs of the Taxpayer’s Alliance, and Danny Kruger of the Legatum Institute amongst others. For example, in the new administration, there are 6 SPADs from the Taxpayer’s Alliance, 5 from Policy Exchange, 3 each from the Centre for Policy Studies and Adam Smith Institute and 2 each from the Institute of Economic Affairs and Henry Jackson Society. It’s not hard to guess the ideas and policy proposals that will emerge from these advisors and the access that will be afforded to right wing think tanks.

In terms of cabinet structure and operations, we’re not sure of the exact power balances at work. The designation of a ‘war cabinet’ is typically bombastic – but we have had similar key cabinet committees before, such as the ‘Star chamber’ or ‘kitchen cabinet’ under Mrs Thatcher or the coalition’s Quad group from 2010-2015. Johnson is not a hands-on PM – and that’s an understatement – and it’s unclear who his deputy will be. May had Damien Green and then David Lidington, pragmatic loyalists who weren’t leadership competitors. And we don’t know too much about the power distribution within cabinet committees, the decision-making bodies that lie beneath cabinet where issues are processed and agendas set. So far, only 6 cabinet committees have been announced, three on Brexit, but given the pro-Brexit shape of cabinet and the immediate government agenda, this isn’t a surprise and these committees are dominated by Brexiteers to deliver priority number one on 31 October.

Dr Peter Lynch is a Senior Lecturer in the Division of History and Politics at the University of Stirling

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Second, where Theresa May’s cabinet sought balance between ‘Leave’ and ‘Remain’ and previous cabinets have sought an ideological balance of left and right plus places for prominent leadership contenders, this cabinet is different. Not much remains of ‘Remain’ and some of Johnson’s competitors were sacked, despite their prominence within the party. This is a cabinet of the committed - Johnson supporters and those prepared to see through a ‘no deal’ Brexit. Indeed, its sole mission is to deliver Brexit at 11pm on 31 October 2019 come what may. Balance and negotiation didn’t lead to Britain leaving in March or April, courtesy of the DUP and ERG. And, the parliamentary arithmetic hasn’t changed in favour of the passage of the withdrawal agreement and doesn’t look like it will either. Johnson has probably concluded that parliamentary support for any withdrawal agreement is impossible, leaving crash-out as the more likely option. Because of its narrow composition, the new cabinet will have significantly more cohesion when it comes to implementing Brexit. But, on the other hand, this development has created more opponents on the Tory back benches and navigating the parliamentary process will be challenging, especially with Jacob Rees-Mogg as Leader of the House of Commons - hardly a neutral figure on Brexit.
Independence via Brexit break up?

Chris Stephens surveys the shifting political terrain the coming period

 Making predictions on what is going to happen in our politics is always difficult. However, once again Scottish Left Review has asked me to pick up the mantle and peer into the immediate future and what the prospects are for Boris Johnson and a ‘no deal’ and what they mean for independence for Scotland.

It is perfectly possible by the time this issue goes to print that we will be in the beginning or the middle of an election campaign, one that will be fought on the twin basis of Brexit and Scottish independence.

Sitting in the House of Commons can have its surreal moments, none more so than Boris Johnson’s first statement as Prime Minister. This was a crash course in Trump-esque politics. A ‘what if Trump had been educated at Eton’ moment. Boris truly is the Etonian Trump. Yet only twenty-four hours before, he embarked on a cabinet reshuffle that would not have looked out of place in an episode of the Game of Thrones such was the carnage. It was a calculated and planned lurch to the right.

In order to take him on, we should dispense with the theory that he is some sort of buffoon or clown. Boris Johnson is devious but he is no clown. Every step taken so far is a calculated move by him and his advisers. For months even when he was written off by the political pundits, he has been preparing for his premiership.

Playing chicken with the European Union in order to get some sort of deal is a deliberate tactic as is the threat of ‘no deal’. For many in the Tory ranks, leaving without a deal and trading on WTO terms is the preferred outcome. For them ‘disaster capitalism’ in which they and their financial backers pick up the pieces at knock down prices is the vision going forward.

Perhaps, the most astonishing sight so far has been so-called former spin doctors, including those from the Blair era, presenting Boris as a social liberal. Really? Under him, we have a Home Secretary who supports capital punishment, and is presiding over the abuses of human rights of asylum seekers, as we are witnessing in Glasgow right now with Serco using surveillance tactics to evict them. And, the recent case of a man heart and breathing issues having his locks changed while attending a hospital appointment further dispels the notion of a socially liberal PM.

Until questioned by me in the House, there was not one mention of workers’ or employment rights in his opening statement. Nor has there been since. Whatever did become of Theresa May’s Workers Rights’ Bill to go alongside the Withdrawal Agreement? Fair to say it’s been consigned to the dustbin of history.

Aside from Boris, other developments are worth noting. The election of a new Liberal Democrat leader suggests a move to the right. Jo Swinson’s record as a Minister has rightly come under some scrutiny. This was the Minister who cut the notice period for redundancy from 90 days to 45 days, voted for cuts to disability benefit, and continued austerity.

The insult to Govan in a memorable episode of Question Time using differing statistics to try and back her arguments, arguments which are now being scrutinised by the Statistics Authority, was a clear example of right-wing middle-class snobbery.

Add to this the clear miscalculation that she and her party should pick the next Prime Minister, or indeed leader of the Labour Party - a privilege that currently is offered, correctly, to card carrying members of the Labour Party.

Ruling out deals with Labour and the SNP demonstrates that the Liberals are considering lending the Tories a route to power in a post-Brexit Britain.

Meanwhile, Labour is still trying to piece together a policy that can satisfy both its ‘leave’ and ‘remain’ voting areas but has yet to find a coherent policy which satisfies all strands of party opinion. However, it is the utterly bizarre reaction to a fairly non-controversial remark from John McDonnell that is worth noting. To suggest, as he did, that whilst not supporting either independence or a referendum on it, that if people vote for that proposition of a referendum then the proposition should happen is common sense. The reaction from some Labour in Scotland politicians - that Westminster should block such a proposition - is foolish and leaves them open to charges of being undemocratic.

There are, of course, still political opportunities in the midst of all this. The current Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) consultation on zero-hour contracts and insecure work presents an opportunity to offer a different vision where fairness in the workplace and dignity at work are achievable targets. The key challenge for us all on the left is to take on the arguments that deregulation is best.

The last curious observation has been attempts by Tory leadership contenders to set the terms of when and by what means there should be an independence referendum. This makes another referendum inevitable. Setting the SNP electoral targets in Westminster or Holyrood elections will serve to motivate the membership to reach those targets.

An electoral contest featuring a positive, progressive vision of independence versus the threat of ‘disaster capitalism’ with an insular view of the outside world, will motivate each and every SNP member to persuade and encourage our fellow Scots that the former is the best way forward.

Chris Stephens in the (SNP) MP for the Glasgow South West constituency
Labour’s political prowess – powerful progress in prospect!

Stephen Low argues Labour’s guns are ready and loaded to shoot Boris and the Tories given the chance

Labour Government led by Jeremy Corbyn Government in the near-ish future is a real prospect. You don’t need to take my word for it. If the spectre of Corbynism wasn’t haunting Westminster, the establishment wouldn’t - as I write - be playing an absurd game of fantasy cabinet. A game where the rule is anyone can be PM – as long as they aren’t Jeremy Corbyn. This panic is well founded. In 2017, a snap election called precisely to crush Labour’s renewed radicalism instead increased the Labour vote by three and a half million and destroyed instead the Tory majority. In the next election, the contrast between a Labour Party prepared to address the manifest crises facing the country and the world – and other parties committed to an inequality generating, climate destroying, market driven consensus will be even more stark.

There are any number of imponderables between now and then. Whether Johnson jumps or is pushed into an early election being the most obvious one. Regardless of circumstance though, if precedent is anything to go by, minority governments tend not to last for a full term so an early election looks more likely than less.

A snap election would, of course, present challenges in terms of organisation and programme. The party is though in a better situation to handle these than at many points in its history. Membership remains somewhere north of half a million, making us the biggest political party in Europe. Our ability to mobilise that membership and campaign has if anything improved since the 2017 election. In that election Momentum targeted seats written off by party HQ. These seats returned Labour MPs. The party machinery is no longer run by the people who, to give just one example - from 2017 - timed the validity of the swipe cards Jeremy, John McDonnell and others used to enter Labour HQ to expire at midnight on the night of the election. Different people, with higher expectations and more sympathy with the hugely enlarged membership and alert to their capacities, are in place now.

The poor performance in the Euro elections in no way undermines this reasoning. Those polls prove very poor predictors of general election performance. Were this not the case, Nigel Farage having come top in both this and the previous EU election, might have succeeded in at least one of his many attempts to gain a Commons seat. The seeming monomania around Brexit isn’t shared by an electorate who have, by necessity, a far wider range of concerns. Concerns that Labour is seeking to address.

In terms of programme, the basis of any manifesto would be the For The Many - Not The Few manifesto of 2017. The radicalism of this document didn’t lie so much in the specific proposals it contained per se. What made it different, and threw Labour’s offering into sharp – and popular – relief was its obvious challenge to the Thatcherite consensus that has been common amongst all of the parties challenging for government anywhere in Britain for the last thirty years.

That isn’t to say that any new manifesto would just be the last one with the numbers adjusted to reflect an additional two years of Tory ghastliness (although I suspect that will feature). It’s more to suggest that it’s likely that the really transformative ideas won’t have been fully developed. Ideas and policies have been proposed around alternative models of ownership, responding to automation – using the need to tackle climate change to drive re-industrialisation and so on. Realising the full potential of these though will require more time and discussion than seems likely to be available. Whenever an election comes, what can be said with confidence is that, like For The Many, a manifesto will be proposed that will reject the consensus that has been in place across Britain for the last forty years.

Nowhere does this create greater fury in the current leadership’s enemies than in the realm of foreign policy. Here Jeremy Corbyn is, in Tony Benn’s phraseology, a signpost and not a weathervane. It is obvious to all that he will have no truck with involvement in US aggression around the world, that he views the ‘never mind the human rights – sell the guns’ stance of current and previous British governments with disdain. This, and not a fondness for publicly owned railways, is his cardinal sin.

Despite every establishment effort - inside and outside of Labour, the security of Jeremy Corbyn’s leadership of the Labour Party is beyond any dispute. This too is a factor in any electoral calculation. The turnaround in Labour’s fortunes during the 2017 election was due in no small part to the necessity on the part of broadcast media to report what Corbyn actually said – rather than what anti-Corbyn sources told favoured lobby correspondents. The patent reasonableness of this mild social democrat combined with his unaffected human decency was a great asset to the party. It will be so again.

There remains much work to be done. If Johnson staggers on for another two years – then when the election comes our programme will be more radical, our candidates better prepared and our idea more refined. That, however, would be small comfort for having had to watch the inflicting of two more years of Tory cruelty and violence at home and abroad. We are ready to govern. We want a general election now!

Stephen Low is a member of the Scottish Labour Party in Glasgow
We live in a time of rapid polarisation and political division. The President of the United States is free to support far-right and neo-Nazi groups while the American left brings an alternative politics to the forefront, even using the word ‘socialism’ in public discourse. All this in a country that only a few decades ago was having witch hunts against anyone associated with socialism.

On this side of the Atlantic, the same basic story is played out. The Brexit ‘debate’ has unleashed hard right British nationalist forces that have enabled ultra-neoliberals, free marketeers and billionaire financial pirates to take over the Westminster government under Boris Johnson. At the same time, Labour MPs, who for years have been undermining their own leader for the crime of trying to re-introduce socialist principles and values to his party, have found in Brexit a new way to attack Corbyn. What they want is a return to the grey economic consensus that lets capitalism off the hook.

Westminster and the traditional twoparty system are in meltdown. It is no surprise, therefore, that we now see a new surge in support for Scottish and Welsh independence. Some who were formerly opposed to independence are becoming ‘indy-curious’ as a response to the rising culture of intolerance. It’s becoming increasingly clear that the endless civil war within Labour means that left opposition to the current nightmare is not possible at a British level. For Plaid Cymru and the SNP, this presents opportunities. But it also presents threats.

There are already four Welsh Brexit Party AMs who, with the Tories, are building the Brit-Nat narrative. This includes the argument our Senedd should be curtailed or even abolished. Furthermore, while Plaid Cymru has over-taken Labour for the first time in Welsh Assembly election polls, the Brexit Party is also polling in the 20% range.

To compound this, we can’t ignore economics. Like the SNP, Plaid Cymru have always recognised that the economic questions and arguments for independence must be answered and made firmly. We cannot forget that the reason we want independence is so that we can create more prosperity for all. We are a small nation rich in natural resources and the question as to whether we can support ourselves in the long run is a ridiculous one. Of course, we can. However, as independence stops being a ‘dream’ and starts to be a question of a ‘when’ rather than an ‘if’, nailing down the detail as to how we get there is essential.

Wales currently spends over £13bn more than it raises in taxes (roughly 34% of total Welsh government spending). Of course, an independent Wales would not spend such large sums on the military and Westminster vanity projects, but we still face a huge gap that needs plugging.

I have always argued that our independence needs to be preceded by a phase of full control over the economic levers needed to rebuild and strengthen our economy. That, coupled with the political work of rebuilding our communities, by doing what needs doing ourselves and overcoming ‘dependence’ has been described as ‘real independence’. Real independence would lead to a full constitutional push for independence. The aim of approaching the journey in this way was to ensure that there would be no tax gap and therefore no requirement for more austerity from day one.

What if we can’t do it that way? What if we are in a situation where historical events over-take us and the Union disintegrates? The change in our circumstances and context requires a shift in our thinking.

The independence movement in Wales must begin the painstaking work of outlining detailed economic plans for a transition to independence.

The new growth surge in support for independence is uplifting. To ensure it is built upon, we need to take all of the powers and economic levers that we need to begin the task of building an independent economy as a matter of urgency. We should also be considering what radical reforms a Plaid Cymru government could introduce within the existing powers framework so that we can start working on reducing that gap in the mean-time.

I have every confidence that Plaid Cymru’s new leader and his team will be able to do this. One of Adam Price’s greatest strengths is that he is a Harvard-trained economist who has been looking at this question for years. Back in 2012, he authored a detailed analysis of the size of the funding gap and understands that popular support and economic planning and detail must go hand in hand. Following the scarcity of detail before the Brexit referendum, this understanding is essential.

People in Wales do not see independence as an end in itself. It is an opportunity to do our politics differently. I speak to people all the time who want to see a more open and tolerant society than the regressive, right wing politics Westminster is capable of producing.

They also want to see an end to the crippling austerity and endless free-market economics that puts property and finance before people and community. If open to it, people agree with me when I say that I want an independence that leads to a Wales where prosperity is shared fairly and where our people can benefit collectively from the fruits of our natural resources.

While our next-door neighbour continues down a dark hole of blaming and scapegoating immigrants, the poor and outsiders for the economic class war imposed on them by the very wealthy, Wales has an opportunity to build something so much better. We can do this, so what’s stopping us?

Leanne Wood has been the Plaid Cymru Welsh Assembly Member for Rhondda AM since 2016. From 2003 until then, she was the Plaid Cymru member for South Wales Central.
Backstop, borders and Brexit – a threat to life and liberty in the Emerald Isle

Gerry Carroll argues a Tory Brexit will spell a disaster for working people

The seemingly never-ending saga of Brexit appears to be entering the crunch stage, as the October 31 deadline for exiting approaches. In Ireland, people are continually shocked at the arrogance, incompetence and ignorance shown by a Tory party intent on forcing through a ‘no-deal’ Brexit, without even the faintest of concern for the wishes of the majority of people North or South of the island. Previously, Boris has compared the border in Ireland to travelling between Camden and Westminster and paying the congestion charge. Northern Ireland is ‘as British as Finchley’ as his hero, Margaret Thatcher, would have put it.

No amount of Tory guff, however, can disguise the realities of the border in Ireland and the difficulties it poses for people who live in its vicinity. Boris and the Tories would be foolish to dismiss these concerns. Previous incarnations of the British ruling class have paid a significant price for doing so.

One does not require a degree in history to realise the border in Ireland cannot be compared to congestion systems in England. It is a deeply political edifice, and one that has been the source of much strife in the island in the last century. It was, after all, imposed on the majority of the Irish people by a counter-revolution, instigated by the British Empire. It was designed to produce a ‘carnival of reaction’, and to blunt the impact of progressive politics in Ireland.

In the North, people who live in Derry and work in Donegal and vice-versa have a genuine fear that the British government could ignore their fear of having to cross a border with checkpoints on it. The Irish National Teachers Organisation (INTO) have raised concerns about this and how teachers could be affected including being forced to carry out more training and longer travel times to get to work.

Not only is it correct to oppose any strengthening of the border because it would be a massive inconvenience to working class people. But at a time when a new and developing debate about a united Ireland is opening up, it would be also self-defeating for those who want to see the dismantling of the boror to tie ourselves to any project that would see its strengthening. No socialist in Ireland, therefore, should contemplate supporting a ‘no-deal’ Brexit.

Currently, there is a stand-off between London and Brussels over the issue of the ‘backstop’. This backstop is designed as a ‘last resort’ measure (in the event of a ‘no deal’ Brexit), to ensure that an arrangement is kept in place to that would mean the North and South of Ireland operates the same trade and customs policy and no hard border is erected.

The Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) see this as another attempt at sneaking a United Ireland through the backdoor, creating a potentially different customs and trade arrangement between Northern Ireland and the rest of Britain, undermining the Brexit they championed and, thus, they oppose the backstop. The Tories are heavily reliant on the DUP to maintain their coalition of carnage. The DUP say they do not want any divergence between Northern Ireland and other parts of Britain. Except, of course, for abortion law and equal marriage, where they have maintained and celebrated divergence for years.

So far, the people in Ireland have been at best an afterthought in the minds of the British government and its negotiating teams. Stopping Jeremy Corbyn entering Number 10, whilst appeasing the little Englishlanders in the Brexit party, seems to drive their motivation more than the upheaval that could be caused to the lives of people in Ireland. This flagrant indifference to the plight of people here has at times made the EU look like a progressive and sensible friend of Ireland. But it is just as plausible that a ‘hard’ border could be enforced by Brussels, as it is that it would come from London.

Indeed, EU bureaucrats have stated that they would insist on a border and custom controls in the event of a ‘no deal’ Brexit, in order to protect the ‘integrity’ of the single market. And, it appears as though they have a willing accomplice in the Irish government. Leo Varadkar, the Irish Taoiseach, has already employed thousands of extra customs officials, police and armed support units to be on standby. The Taoiseach has so far failed to rule out a ‘hard’ border or said anything about using Ireland’s veto to block any deal which tries to beef up the border in Ireland.

The EU’s main concern is not for peace in Ireland or harmony between North and South but the supremacy of its markets. The Irish government should boldly state that it will not abide by any requests from the EU for border posts, custom checks or tariffs between North and South in the event of a ‘no-deal’ Brexit. The economic interest of elites in Brussels cannot be used to create upheaval in Ireland.

People Before Profit stands with neither London nor Brussels in this ongoing fight between a declining British empire and a burgeoning European empire. We oppose all attempts to restrict people’s right to move freely across this island. We advocate a people power form of civil disobedience to make these measures unworkable if the elites try to install them against the wishes of the vast majority here.

A ‘no deal’ Brexit will be disastrous for Ireland, with talks of widescale job losses, food and medicine shortages. We cannot allow the Tories or the EU to pass the buck onto ordinary, and must resist all efforts by the ruling elites to use this crisis to create a new carnival of reaction in the twenty-first century.

Gerry Carroll is the Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) in Northern Ireland for People Before Profit in West Belfast.
A charter for workers’ rights in Scotland: developing devolution

The Jimmy Reid Foundation made this submission to the Institute of Employment Rights

The Jimmy Reid Foundation, with 11 affiliates from the major unions in Scotland and an interest and expertise in matters of employment relations, welcomes the publication of the Institute of Employment Rights (IER) draft Charter of Workers’ Rights as an attempt to help turn the stated intentions from the SNP Scottish Government into more concrete actions in the context of the advance of neo-liberalism and the SNP’s clear preference for national action plans and strategies which are devoid of sufficient compulsion and resources to ensure effective implementation. For example, the number of employers that, as of April 2019, have signed up to the voluntary Scottish Business Pledge (involving paying the independent Living Wage and not using zero-hour contracts) is just 624, covering 112,510 workers, representing just 4.5% of all jobs in Scotland and 0.4% of the registered business base in Scotland after being launched in 2015. Rather belatedly, the SNP Scottish Government has put some meat on the bones of its Fair Work Framework by setting out Fair Work First in terms of compelling employers in receipt of public funds to adopt certain employment standards and practices.

We see that the strengths of the Charter are that, whilst recognising the limitations of employment matters still being reserved business, the Charter seeks to advance the cause of workers within this framework. To do anything other – like accepting the status quo or arguing for changes that can only at the moment and for the foreseeable future be made at Westminster – would be foolhardy. We also see the strengths of the Charter in trying not only to extend the degree of Scottish Government intervention (including gaining or compelling employer support and involvement in the process) but also in tightly monitoring and measuring the outcomes stemming from this suggested enhanced intervention. We see the Charter in this regard as an attempt to push forward the Scottish Government in a way comparable to the Fair Work First initiative but with more urgency and drive. Finally, we also note favourably that the Charter proposes a ‘coercive element’ in doing so in contrast to the Scottish Government’s overwhelming reliance on voluntary means.

However, we would suggest that the Charter reflects on what we believe to be four critical points.

First, in advocating an enhanced form of social dialogue like that found in continental western Europe, there is a potential danger that unions and their resources (personnel etc.) are sucked into an extended form of consultation, with the Scottish Government that pound for pound of resources - delivers relatively little. It is the experience of the STUC since devolution that it has become over-committed to involving itself in this activity with the effect that this has skewed the way in which it expends its resources. Either the Scottish Government should be asked to provide further resources to the STUC in order to engage in this activity or the proffered processes and outcomes of this activity need to be moved from those based around consultation to those based around negotiation.

Second, the Charter would benefit from examining the experience of the Welsh Assembly Government on workers’ rights in regard of the Trade Union Act 2016, blacklisting and public procurement and so on because, it would prima facie seem, that the government in Wales has done more here than the Scottish Government has done in Scotland but with seemingly less powers and resources.

Third, the Charter should give specific attention to the implications of the devolution of employment law to Scotland because, while most unions support this policy in principle, very little work has been carried out on what this might mean in practice. Other than on the issue of, say, employment tribunals, the range of issue and aspects that could be devolved has not been extensively discussed and what form these employment rights should take in terms of being individual or collective rights and whether this would also include equalities legislation (which covers services as well as employment).

And, finally, the call for a right to engage in sectoral bargaining (as with the Manifesto for Labour Law published by the IER in 2016) is to be welcomed. However, if this is to ensure that advances are made, it requires to be accompanied by an increase in union density and organisation in the workplaces covered by the sectoral bargaining. In other words, unions require to have the necessary leverage to gain good bargaining outcomes. It is for this reason that we suggest the Charter considers the proposals for a union default (see Harcourt, M., Gall, G., Kumar, R.V., and Croucher, R. (2019) ‘A union default: A policy proposal to raise union membership’, Industrial Law Journal, 48/1:66-97) or auto-enrolment (see Dromey, J. (2018) Power to the People: How stronger unions can deliver economic justice, IPPR, London), especially because the proposals on union access to workplaces to recruit and organise, in a decentralised industrial relations system, where employers hold the whip hand, will be difficult to realise. In making this suggestion, we acknowledge that there may be practical issues and potential problems associated with auto-enrolment that may have to be considered, including the issue of a mechanism to determine which unions workers in particular sectors should be auto-enrolled to and how the potential for inter-union disputes over membership might be avoided.
‘New’ SNP but same old party lessons?

Shcotland’s political order has changed with SNP straddling the land as Labour once did. The former giants now reduced to sniping from the side-lines. That this is about the life cycle of politics and that all political parties evolve acknowledges the transformation of society and the economy and reflects new generations of members drawn into activity.

I’ve been there sniping at a Labour Government and sitting in an SNP administration, as well as being part of the SNP’s transformation in the 1980s and 1990s. Transformation can be essential but can also come at a cost. Some can object and, looking back at my early SNP days, some actions by the new intake, including myself, could be insensitive. But it was both inevitable and essential and the rest, as they say, is history.

But likewise, I also recall kneejerk attacks upon Labour by the SNP that were sometimes justified but often not. Good things were done by Labour administrations. The response from myself and others in the SNP was that it was never far, fast or good enough. That began to change as it was realised such attacks were neither appropriate nor even electorally popular.

Being in government also confirmed that power is not absolute and there are huge constraints upon what can be done, as well as how fast or far you can go. Sadly, the tribal instinct runs deep in Scottish politics and the errors of early SNP have not been learned by contemporary Scottish Labour. Blanket opposition is an electoral turnoff, as Scottish Labour is now discovering.

I was minded of that when having a coffee with a former Labour minister. He’d a Labour hinterland but came to office with ‘new’ Labour. It caused me to reflect on both being in opposition and in government, as well as the changes that take place as parties evolve. There were similarities but also lessons to be learned.

The SNP has now become a formidable electoral machine, as Labour was before it, and a ‘new’ SNP is also now emerging. Much of that is good and of benefit. Professionalisation is required in politics, being in government brings opportunities and increased membership is welcome in a political party.

But there are issues that arise as well as pitfalls that need avoided in regards of membership, organisation and government. Some are light hearted while others are much more fundamental and serious. SNP membership is now the largest in Scotland, as once it was Labour. New members being elected or grassroots re-invigorated have electrified and added to the party.

I ruminated to my Labour colleague that though I’d been an adversary of his party for decades, I had a grudging respect for many but later wondered just what some new members were doing in that party. What I meant was ‘power attracts’ as they say not just loyal members supporting the cause but also a few sadly seeking a career, and they go where political power lies. The band of brothers and sisters was an activist-based party could never be maintained. That’s just the unfortunate price of success, I suppose.

Thankfully it’s just a few though it must perplex some in Labour as it once did me. But now turnover of staff and the proliferation of non-disclosure agreements in Holyrood also testifies to a culture of entitlement and loss of solidarity. Those in charge of candidate vetting and party management need to take responsibility.

Closeness, perceived or otherwise, to individuals or corporate lobbyists is also unseemly. Some of that’s just life in the little village that Scotland is and yet it needs to be guarded against. But it also comes around as a result of a tight inner circle existing within SNP, where many either are - or are closely connected. Greater transparency, at minimum, is required.

For the real irony surely must be that despite its experiential growth, the SNP has never been a more centralised machine. Some of that’s understandable given the requirements of office. It’s not easy giving members their say when governments are often required to react immediately and representative democracy is hard when time and space are limited.

Others aspects, though, are entirely within the control of the party and are very much deliberate, unconstrained choices. The centralisation of power under an inner cadre that constrains cabinet members, let alone dissenting voices outside that cadre, is unhealthy and afflicts both party and government. Leaks and briefings against individuals by that corps are an abuse of power.

Whilst its necessary to have a close relationship between party and government, it also true that distance and independence are required. Party HQ is not viewed as an independent arbiter but an adjunct for the First Minister’s Office. That the spouse of the First Minister remains as the party’s Chief Executive is not just unseemly but also unhealthy. When there are complaints of the handling over candidate selection and ranking, it’s in danger of becoming an abuse of power. The marginalisation of individuals - even some in senior elected roles but from without the inner circle - is damaging to the wider cause.

There appears to be a fear - not just a reluctance - to have open debate because everything has to be politically managed and ‘on message’. Fundamental issues have been stifled when such discussions are often cathartic and inspirational. The bloody nose the leadership received on the Growth Commission was not only good for party democracy but stimulated many within the party. Failure to debate a strategy for independence is breeding resentment and causing a fraying at the edges as frustration sets in.

The style has become almost presidential. For sure, promote the First Minister who is hugely able but allow others to shine. I pondered how years ago in opposition we’d laughingly challenge folk to name five Labour MPs.
After Brown, Cook and Darling, they’d struggle. Now the same applies to the SNP Scottish Government Cabinet.

Image, rather than ideology, has become paramount. Some of that is necessary to ensure retaining power. Press releases of achievements are all well and good but a coherent strategy is equally essential. Power has to be for a purpose. Profile should be for the cause, not the individual.

As with Labour in its day, there are both challenges from and excuses provided by a Tory government. In my opposition days, Labour could often shelter under the shadow of the Tories. It was a credible bulwark to the hardship that otherwise would befall, even if it sometimes also excused inaction. Almost invariably the right position and correct rhetoric was provided even if the precise actions were limited or inadequate.

Now that sometimes appears to be the case with ‘new’ SNP. It talks the talk and invariably gets around to the right position eventually. But the delay can be frustrating and the action - when eventually taken – somewhat inadequate. Here, climate emergencies and health crises spring to mind. The appalling situation currently being faced and coming down the line is frightening. Current proposals are far too timid and all the blame cannot just be pinned on Westminster.

There’s a reluctance to be radical or act quickly on almost any issue. The heavy tendency towards inertia on even the most modest proposals such as a tourist tax or parking levy testify to that. Scottish Labour’s absurd opposition on the latter is as shameful as some positioning taken by SNP in past years. Consultations and reviews - followed by reviews into consultations - are also a throwback to Labour administrations. But they’re part of an agenda of drawing out criticism rather than being bold or brave in stating what you believe in and acting upon that.

Defensiveness from a hostile media is understandable and promoting the successes of the government and party is essential. There are many that should be rightly lauded by both the administration at Holyrood and in local authorities. But overplaying your hand is also unhelpful.

Public services are not all great in Scotland. Far from it. Years of austerity have taken their toll. Public services most certainly are, in the main, far superior to south of the border where the privatisation agenda has inflicted such carnage. But all politics at the end of the day is local. Folk care about their child’s school, the health service they use and the services in their community. Being told how much better they are than in England or Wales is a debating point for politicians, more than an encouragement for voters.

A bit of magnanimity would work far better. The SNP is trying to do its best in adverse circumstances dictated by enforced austerity. Acknowledging that’s not only realistic but acceptable to most. That was brought home in a recent social media spat with the police federations. Boasting about how wonderful police numbers were and contrasting with England simply irritated front-line representatives struggling with the reality of life on the streets.

Incumbency, whilst opening doors, also breeds isolation though some of that actually seems a matter of deliberate choice. The pivot to the right with the Growth Commission has not won over business backers and, indeed, some former supporters have been lost. Likewise, the most worrying aspect of the Edinburgh Sick Kids’ Hospital debacle is the appalling relationship between the Cabinet Secretary and the unions for staff there. Relationships need to be worked at and not just assumed or taken for granted.

Many groups that were very supportive - and pivotal even in policy formation - now feel neglected or aren’t used as the source of policy advice as once they were. The latter are now dealt with by officials or special advisers but both often without the requisite knowledge or experience. Some of that is part of the natural course of politics: it’s easier to meet or lobby oppositions than governments but some of it is at best oversight or at worse arrogance and needs to be checked.

The SNP administration has, like Labour ones before it, become managerial and the sense of purpose blurred. For sure, there’s been progress on gender and sexual equality issues but a loss of clarity, if not direction, on wealth or land inequalities. The agenda of individual rights rather than the collective good has proven insufficient for social democratic parties across Europe, and the danger is it will be the same in Scotland.

Years ago, I would have described SNP’s international equivalent as Fianna Fail. Nationalist but rooted in working people, and on the centre-left of the country’s political spectrum. Now I sense, the SNP is actually more like Fine Gael (much as I admire the current Irish governments stance on Brexit): on the centre-right and not willing to confront the establishment and established ways.

Of course, as with their predecessors, the SNP is doing its best and, indeed, well on some aspects. It’s not easy being in government or under the constraints of this Tory administration but it should heed some lessons, lighten up and broaden the base. The Scottish Government isn’t just the administration but the vanguard of the national movement. It’s a vital part of the independence campaign, even if the next referendum will also be required to be led by others. Given the Brexit debacle and the crisis in the British state, greater efforts need made and further progress must be achieved. Mitigation of London austerity is insufficient. A radical direction is also required. Dare I say: the ‘new’ SNP needs to learn some lessons from ‘old’ Labour.

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 ‘Jimmy Reid: A Scottish Political Journey’).
The Scottish Government doesn’t care about poor people

Robbie McLaughlan explains the SNP’s double-speak on the plight of the poor

In September 2005, actor, Mike Myers, and hip-hop artist, Kanye West, appeared on US television to solicit donations as part of a celebrity-driven fundraiser for the displaced victims of Hurricane Katrina. It was during their segment on the hour-long A Concert for Hurricane Relief that West suddenly abandoned the autocue to declare that: ‘George Bush doesn’t care about black people’. West used the platform afforded him to draw attention to how an environmental disaster had developed into a humanitarian crisis disproportionately affecting black and poor communities. In calling out the Bush administration, West exposed the thinly veiled truth that the federal government’s use of a discourse of disaster and emergency belied the reality of their sluggish response to the crisis.

Writing in the aftermath of Katrina, and the subsequent displacement of African Americans from prime downtown real estate, cultural critic, Naomi Klein, echoed West’s claim by interpreting the Bush administration as proponent of what she termed ‘disaster capitalism’.

The residents in districts like the lower ninth ward, and in other areas of the city destroyed by the floods, had the misfortune of being too black, occupying housing too valuable to covetous real estate prospectors and being disenfranchised from federal politics (in 2000 Bush won all 9 electoral college votes in Louisiana despite only 10% of African Americans voting nationally, 90% of whom voted for Al Gore).

As the Black Lives Matter movement continues to reveal, the contemporary structuration of American society along racial lines of division remains complicated and multi-faceted. It is not the intention of this article to make clumsy lines of association between African American poverty and the rising levels of inequality blighting the poorest communities in Scotland. However, I take as my starting point West’s remark to show how, in Scotland, the language of disaster has been mobilised in Holyrood to decry inequality, while being accompanied by a similarly listless policy response.

This discourse of disaster has recently featured in the reportage mobilised to document the National Records of Scotland’s (NRS) report on drug-related deaths, published in July of this year. The fallout of the NRS report, ‘Drug-related deaths in Scotland in 2018’, has created headlines across the world. The New York Times, on 7 August 2019, carried an investigative piece high on the front page of its online version that followed the lives of drug users in Glasgow, along with various graphic depictions detailing the misery of life in modern Scotland. It was with a mixture of surprise, sadness and incredulity that the New York Times observed that: ‘[o]ver doses are more common in Scotland, by some measure, than even in the United States’; this all within a country whose booming tartan culture industry manufactures dewy-eyed romanticism like the television show Outlander while having ‘a higher baseline rate of both drug and alcohol misuse’ than the U.S. and a society characterised by a ‘chronic underinvestment in public health’.

The NRS report paints a grim portrait of a country struggling to get a handle on the issue of drugs – or having already lost it. The attention-grabbing statistic that drug-related deaths in Scotland increased 27% between 2017 and 2018 has been reprinted with such frequency that it is now a macabre meme recalling the unfortunate tagline of Scotland as ‘the sick man of Europe’.

The NRS report also makes particularly uncomfortable reading for a Scottish Government eager to portray an image of a policy agenda that embraces a social democratic form of ‘Scandi-utopianism’ and prioritises social inclusivity in such a way that renders it distinct from the rest of Britain. Yet since 2007, when the Scottish National Party formed a minority government, the number of drug-related deaths has more than doubled. Between 2008 (574 deaths) and 2013 (727 deaths), there was relatively little fluctuation in the numbers, but from the symbolically important date of 2014 onwards, there has been a sharp spike in the number of deaths: 614 in 2014; 706 in 2015; 868 in 2016; and 934 in 2017, culminating in 1,187 deaths in 2018. The SNP won a majority of the vote in the 2011 election and the right to form a government in Holyrood, yet this period of SNP government has coincided with an acceleration in the number of drug-related deaths in every year it has been in power.

The media has made much of the so-called ‘Trainspotting Generation’, a demographic predominantly male, now aged between 35 and 44 years old, and a group that accounts for approximately 26% of all drug-related deaths in Scotland. Written in a dispassionate and coolly bureaucratic tone, the report outlines that 1,017 or 86% of all deaths were caused by ‘accidental poisoning’. The underlying causes are classified under the following taxonomic headings: ‘drug abuse’; ‘accidental poisoning’; ‘Intentional self-poisoning’; ‘assaults by drugs, etc’; and ‘undetermined intent’. As is to be expected from an apparatus of government that deals in the quantitative and not the qualitative, there is no attempt to understand how these chosen headings are a manifestation of the same underlying issue: gross social inequality. People are literally dying on the streets of Scotland as a result of socio-economic inequality.

Coinciding with the publication of the NRS report, the collaborative research partnership between the University of the West of Scotland and Oxfam produced a report entitled ‘On Target for 2030? An independent snapshot review of Scotland’s progress against the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals’, a document that sets out to map the Scottish Government’s progress against a set of indexed social coordinates. While the report’s authors commend the limited progress made against UN indicators such as ‘No Poverty’, ‘Zero Hunger’, and ‘Good Health and Well-being’, any impulse towards a Scottish Ministerial triumphalism is undercut by the fact that, according to the report, ‘poverty is now rising, especially amongst children’ in light of the overall lack of ‘urgency’ shown by law-makers to tackle poverty. This critique of a slumberous policy is echoed in the report’s analysis of the ‘little substantive progress’ that has been made in the government’s attempts
to eradicate hunger by 2030; if anything, the report urges the Scottish government to adopt ‘bolder action [...] especially given the growing inequality between more and less affluent households’. A portrait of inaction emerges in the discourse deployed by the contributors to the UWS-Oxfam report which establishes a clear dissonance between the discourse of national emergency and the actuality of governmental inactivity to enact radical policy solutions.

Since the publication of the NRS report, the Scottish Government, and supporters of independence more broadly, have been zealous in their attempts to redirect culpability elsewhere, based on the constitutional prohibition reserving drug policy to Westminster. Counter-arguments that emphasise the methodological difference in how statistics are collated in England and Wales belies the fact that people continue to die while the government ventriloquises a language of national emergency. Joe FitzPatrick, the Scottish Government’s Public Health Minister, invoked the language of crisis when referring to an ongoing national ‘emergency’ on the issue of drugs, which prompted him to write to the then Home Secretary, Sajid Javid, inviting him to a ‘summit’ to discuss ‘how we can work together to help stop the increasing number of drug deaths in Scotland’. While FitzPatrick, the SNP and the more uncritical supporters of independence have been quick to disavow responsibility, to redirect the blame and to re-invest a collective ire towards Westminster, they have, paradoxically, been keen to garner credit for the spectacular drop in knife crime.

Glasgow, in particular, has been held up as a sociological model of how to combat knife crime by those seeking a solution to the current blight on London’s streets. This reduction in knife crime has come about from a radical rethinking of policy – one which the SNP seems reluctant to repeat on the issue of drugs – which resulted in a reframing of knife violence towards both a causal model and, crucially, a discourse of public health. Therein lies a troubling question for the Scottish Government: why does it refuse to approach drugs in a similarly holistic way, even if legislatively neutered by London? Why has it cowered away from implementing the sort of action that would see it go head-to-head with the Westminster Government – the spectacle of Home Office stooges deployed to close ‘fix rooms’ north of the border would be manna from heaven for independence strategists – and to address a problem that its own representatives have configured in the language of a national disaster and national emergency?

There are, of course, a myriad of complicated socio-economic reasons relating to the rise in drug-related deaths in Scotland - too many to articulate here. But what remains undeniable is that they are socio-economic in origin, with an added emphasis on the economic. The NRS identifies the largest killer within Scotland’s drug taking community as ‘accidental poisoning’, but the manifest causation is inequality.

The Salmond-ian neo-liberal vision of Scotland and free-market ideologues within the independence movement have a dual interest in presiding over the collapse of order within Scotland’s poorest communities. The horror of drug-related deaths in Scotland can be weaponised as a potent means by which to launch another political sortie against ‘the Union’, as evidenced by the speed and vigour in which blame has been redirected to Westminster for its refusal to sanction drug consumption sites in Glasgow. Disaster capitalists like the current Finance Secretary, Derek Mackay – for how else to interpret his enthusiastic outsourcing of state responsibility to nefarious private corporations like Barclays Bank, with its origins in slavery, in Kilmarnock? – provide a glimpse into the future of an independent Scotland in which all aspects of the state apparatus can be auctioned off to private enterprise to fix the social issues that government refuses.

Yet, there is one final explanation for the Scottish Government’s lotus-eater response to the increasing inequality underpinning the drug-death crisis in Scotland and a governmental refusal to act radically: independence itself. A powerful demographic of voters emerged in the aftermath of the 2014 Scottish Referendum – ‘soft’ yes and ‘soft’ no voters – that has stymied radical thinking at the level of governmental policy in Scotland. This new, liberal, middle-class, constituency of the Scottish electorate has benefited disproportionately from a raft of bespoke SNP policies that owe more to ‘nudge theory’, than to any authentic socialist or humanitarian impulse. Simply put, the Scottish middle classes have attained even greater importance in the eyes of nationalist strategists on account of their propensity to vote. The language used may be of emergency and expediency, but the actual message emanating out of Holyrood is as obscene as it is clear - it is a message that recalls West’s critique of a federal government that privileges the lives of wealthier citizens above the most vulnerable. The only logical way to understand the rise in homelessness, the rise of child poverty, the rise in hunger and the rise in drug-related deaths in Scotland is as further evidence for a truth that has become undeniable. This is that the Scottish Government doesn’t care about poor people.

Robbie McLaughlan lives in Glasgow and is a Lecturer in English Literature at Newcastle University
Drug-related deaths: communities come together

Angela McCormack reports on how people are revolting against the politicians’ inaction

In 2018 in Scotland, the number of drug-related deaths reached 1,187. This is an increase of 27% from 2017. It is the largest number ever recorded and it has more than doubled in the last decade. These figures are the highest in Europe. When the averages for 2004-2008 and 2014-2018 are compared, they show a staggering 212% increase in drug-related deaths for females and a 75% increase for males.

In response to the publication of the figures, hundreds of people gathered in Glasgow on 28 July 28 for a vigil to remember all of those who have died. The aim was to draw attention to this crisis, to demand action and to stand up for all those lost, as individuals who were loved and are missed. ‘They keep talking, we keep dying’ was the message on the wristbands given out on the night.

It was a late Sunday night gathering, 10pm in George Square, and it was clear that the call for a memorial had brought together the families, friends and communities of those affected. It is working class, deprived areas which are predominantly affected. These communities have lived with the problems of drug and alcohol misuse for decades. The rise in deaths among the older age group is testament to this.

There was a call for people to wear white T-shirts to the rally, with the names of those who had died written on them and these were visible throughout. There were candles and photographs of loved ones. Many of those attending were part of the recovery community and knew each other. As the crowd grew, people greeted one another warmly. This was a grassroots action, organised through social workers and health professionals in attendance. Their conversations centred on the actual state of health and support services across Glasgow and throughout Scotland. The cuts to social care and the health service mean that every story of personal loss and grief can be matched with stories of people being turned away and denied the support they badly need. This is a source of anger for many. Service closures and larger cuts, as a result of the Tories austerity assault, is combined with a vicious welfare system. People are sanctioned, put on Universal Credit and face destitution, poverty, poor housing and homelessness. This is a recipe for further deaths.

The feeling of ‘enough is enough’ is motivating communities to act to hold politicians to account. It is difficult for either the SNP, Scottish Government or indeed, Scottish Labour, to avoid. The Tories’ blocking of drug consumption rooms highlights why the Scottish Government should have greater power now to implement policies on drugs.

However, the fact of ‘they keep talking, we keep dying’ means people are tired of bold statements and little action. There is a wealth of expertise, experience and knowledge across communities and health and social care in Scotland.

We don’t need a summit to tell us that, but if there is one then they need to be included. What is needed is political change and funding. We need to link the issue of drugs death to the ravages of the Tory policies which daily increase the pressures and personal crises suffered by the poorest and vulnerable and, thus, directly lead to more drug-related deaths. The cuts have to be reversed and the repeated failures, at council and government level in Scotland, to radically challenge austerity has to end. We don’t want to see our friends’, families’ and neighbours’ lives reduced to debating points in a party-political war of words. There were, at least, one or two Labour councillors at the vigil in George Square. There were no politicians speaking or mentioned, other than to demand action. There was another rally planned at the end of August. Glasgow SNP councillors should be there, as should we all. This is an opportunity to show solidarity and is the real hope for change.

Angela McCormack is resident of Possilpark in Glasgow, a college lecturer and member of the SWP. She attended the aforementioned rallies.
Stephen Smellie looks forward to the rebellion unleashed by a Swedish school student

Thousands of young people across the world are preparing for strike action on 20 September. However, it is not unions or any leftist parties that are organising and leading this strike movement. Instead, hundreds of school students, co-ordinating through social media, have been educating, agitating and organising their peers to take part in strikes from attending school to demand action by governments to slow down and stop global warming and climate change.

When Swedish school student, Greta Thunberg, decided to stand outside the Swedish parliament instead of going to school, she sparked a movement that has been more successful in pressurising governments on climate change than almost any other campaign before.

Unions should be hugely grateful that Greta didn’t just say it was a protest or an action. Instead, she called it ‘Skolstrejk for Klimatet’ - School Strike for Climate - and immediately re-introduced to young people’s consciousness the idea that to challenge power taking strike action was a powerful and energising action. From this, an opportunity has been created to develop a ‘trade union consciousness’ amongst young people by demonstrating the progressiveness of unions, engaging with their movement and offering support for their aims and actions.

Less than a year after Greta’s first solitary Skolstrejk, Friday 20 September looks like being a massive day of action with demonstrations being planned for Glasgow and Edinburgh and across Europe, America and around the world. Several of these events have taken place in the past months but in addition to school students taking action, Greta and her supporters have called on ‘adults’ to also take action and to join what has become known as the Climate Strike.

Whilst this includes asking businesses to take action on the day, it is a clear call for workers and their unions to step up to the challenge of combating climate change and to be inspired by the actions of the school students - in many cases our children and grandchildren.

The TUC at its congress in early September this year will be debating a UCU motion calling for lunch time stoppages on the 20 September in support of the young people. UNISON, taking a lead from its Scottish branches who have declared the 20 September a ‘Green UNISON Day’. This means calling upon branches to take actions on the day and having declared the week leading up to this Friday a ‘Green UNISON Week’. Other unions are making similar declarations.

The STUC is briefing affiliates on the aims of the climate strike and encouraging them to show support for the aims of the school students. They are acting as a liaison between the climate strike co-ordinators and unions and will themselves co-ordinate any financial support that can be offered to assist with the cost of organising the demonstrations on the 20 September.

The STUC Young Workers Committee has decided that they will play a role in the action. In addition to the official structures of unions making preparations, various branches of Unite, PCS, UCU and EIS, have been discussing motions and making plans for supportive actions.

None will be taking industrial action. The anti-union laws don’t allow even consideration of this. Yet it is also clear that workers and their unions are not at the level of consciousness on this issue to be ready to take strike action. Therefore, the activities being planned must look to raise that consciousness within unions and their members of why the climate change issue is important and deserves to be a far greater priority for them.

Actions that are being considered for the 20 September include lunchtime meetings including inviting school strikers to visit workplaces, union banners being present on demonstrations, union leaders making public statements in support, union branches calling on their employers, public and private sector, to declare a ‘Climate Emergency’ and work on action plans to address this, planting trees to symbolise the need to protect and grow more forests with attention on the plight of the Amazon, using social media to express solidarity with the school students, calling for the switching off of all non-essential lights and electrical equipment.

Unions in the school sector have a key role to play. The climate strikers have called for a day in the week after the 20 September where the normal curriculum is cancelled and they have a ‘teach-in’ where lessons are focussed on climate change.

Teachers and school support staff, and their unions, should engage with this initiative and make plans with school students for this.

The news that Glasgow looks set to host the next United Nations Climate Conference, COP 26, in December 2020 adds a further challenge to every politician, local and national, in Scotland to ensure that rhetoric about world-leading climate legislation is made manifest before the world descends on the Clyde. Unions and other civic organisations must ensure that, along with the young climate strikers, we use the 20 September as the launch of a broad, mass movement to ensure young people and workers’ voices are heard and that we see Scotland actually leading on climate change, a Just Transition for workers and a future for our young people.

Stephen Smellie is the UNISON Scotland Depute Convenor and a National Executive Committee member of UNISON.
Time is tight: revolting against extinction

Dylan Hamilton outlines a week of escalating action against climate change by youngsters

From 20 to 27 of September, there will be a massive week of action with people in over one hundred countries around the globe taking part. This week of action has come after years of governments and corporations ignoring climate change to the point where action is urgent. For the whole week, people in different countries will have a variety of events on, ranging from marches to die-ins and to days of simply enjoying being outdoors.

Humanity has known about climate change for decades, with the oil industry arguably knowing before anyone else. We didn’t act on it. We brushed it off as some kind of natural occurrence (when our finest scientists were shouting at us that we were wrong). We’ve ignored it for so long that we can’t take gradual steps any more. Rather, the changes we make have to be drastic. That’s why we need as many people as possible to participate in the forthcoming week of action. It’s necessary that the governments in Britain and elsewhere are shown that the public are serious about this crisis.

The main event in Scotland will be hosted by Scottish Youth Climate Strike on the 20 September, which is the third global strike for climate. The factor that makes this strike unique, compared to any before, is that we are calling on every person to get involved and that includes adults. The climate crisis affects every human being, so we want the adults to join the youth and young on the streets for the 20 to call for immediate action. There will be a march in Edinburgh from the Meadows to Parliament and a march in Glasgow from Kelvingrove Park to George Square. The climate crisis is one of the biggest threats to humanity in history so it’s essential that we have a large turnout. Everyone is asked to bring alarm bells to symbolise waking up. The world, especially those in power, need to wake up to the climate crisis and join the fight to stop it.

On the 21 September, the next day, there will be the second action of the week. This is the ‘Death of Our Planet’ day. This day is to raise awareness about our planet’s dying condition. It is our lifeboat and yet we’re destroying it. We will be hosting die-ins across Scotland. This will be a visual representation of our future if we do not act. If climate breakdown is not prevented, we are pushing ourselves towards extinction.

The following day, the 22 September, is the ‘Day of Discussion’. We ask people to come together in multiple locations to discuss solutions we want to see in our local areas. People should share with each other all the problems they’ve encountered as a result of the government’s failure to tackle them. These discussions will be youth led, primarily by members of Scottish Youth Climate Strike.

As we go into the working week, we will have the ‘Day of Disruption’. Throughout this day, there will be multiple legal disruptions to remind everyone that, no matter how annoying disruption currently is, the destruction from climate change will be far worse. This is also the day of the UN Climate Action Summit so we are pushing for more noticeable methods of protesting. Teachers are crucial for the next day, the ‘Day of Education’. We want every school to show they care and spend the day educating pupils on the reality of the climate crisis. Teachers will be working with Scottish Youth Climate Strike to provide inclusive and engaging events in, preferably, every school. We have already been in contact with EIS, the largest teaching union in Scotland, as this day is key for getting more young people involved in their future.

‘Love for Our Planet’ will be a day where we ask everyone to stop a few times throughout their day and think about the planet. It will be an average Wednesday, but we hope everyone will appreciate the magnificence of the planet we all share. Simply put, everybody should show some love for our planet.

Thursday 26 September is called ‘Act Now’. We are demanding the government act now, and there will be a rally outside parliament during First Minister’s Questions (FMQs). There will be a large group of strikers attending FMQs, and people are needed to put pressure on the government with a large protest throughout the day.

The last day of the week of action, the 27 September, will be another youth strike. This day is the ‘End of the Beginning’ and its purpose is to signify the start of a new chapter for the Fridays For Future movement, after hopefully building lots of support during the week. If people are unable to strike, they’re encouraged to protest via other methods, such as silent strikes at school or in the workplace. We will have lots of momentum after the week to push forwards climate justice, and we will not stop until that is achieved.

The world is collapsing. We, humanity, are causing it. Every year gets hotter, and our emissions are not slowing down. We are losing our ice caps and our oceans are boiling. We are poisoning our coral. We’re creating the sixth mass extinction, taking away nature for our own greed. It is crucial that we take responsibility and work together to stop this, so SYCS and the young people of the world urge everybody to take part in the September week of action.

Dylan Hamilton is fifteen years old and active in Scottish Youth Climate Strike (SYCS) – see https://www.sycs.org.uk/
NHS wholly-owned subsidiaries –
difference of approach between Scotland
and England

Jackie Williams highlights the differences and similarities the NHS faces on privatisation north and south of the border

The dangers inherent in NHS trusts in England setting up wholly owned subsidiaries (WOSs) - in a bid to avoid tax - are increasingly apparent in terms of threats to patient services and jobs. Of this, we are rightly critical. However, how does the situation in England compare to other devolved nations, such as Scotland? While it would be easy to assess the situation in Scotland as being considerably different and less threatening to patients and jobs when compared with the rapid privatisation taking place in England, this is too simplistic. So, while the pace towards privatisation in England is fast and furious, in Scotland there is undoubtedly damage being done to the NHS, with the pace more akin to slow and steady.

There are major problems in the NHS in Scotland. These include a major PFI/NPD newly-built children’s hospital in Edinburgh that is lying empty, despite the NHS forking out £1.4m in repayments every month, an increased use of private patient beds when there is a shortage of others, outsourced services, patients fit for discharge that are forced to remain in hospital through cuts in community social care and adaptation provision and consistently missed waiting time targets for operations. An Audit Scotland report warned the NHS in Scotland is ‘not in a financially sustainable position’, with NHS boards ‘struggling to break even, relying increasingly on Scottish government loans and one-off savings’. Workers in the NHS are also facing issues around recruitment and retention and a squeeze on pay. Indeed, Unite is presently involved in indefinite strike action by low paid pharmaceutical support workers at Tayside NHS. Yes, there are employee directors in Scotland as part of a ‘partnership’ approach. They perform a role in presenting the unions’ case. But this is increasingly under strain in several NHS areas in Scotland and there is growing demand from union reps and members for a return to collective bargaining.

In comparison, in England the privatisation process continues apace, despite the health and social care secretary, Matt Hancock, promising MPs in January 2019 that: ‘There is no privatisation of the NHS on my watch’. The facts undermine Hancock’s credibility here. Unite believes, as do many others, the prime ideology behind the NHS privatisation agenda is designed to drive down the pay and employment conditions of dedicated NHS staff.

According to its annual report, the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) handed a record total of £9.2bn last year to private providers such as Virgin Care and the Priory mental health group. That’s a 14% increase from the £8.1bn that went to profit-driven healthcare companies in 2014-15. More than 30 WOSs have been set up in England by 2018 – and to discover the impact of this worrying trend Unite, with its 100,000 health service members, is commissioning a report this autumn into its 100,000 health service members, is commissioning a report this autumn into the use of WOSs by trusts in England. We will pinpoint the cost implications and the potential colossal waste of money generated by the creation of an extra management layer.

We believe WOSs could be creating dozens of Carillion-type meltdowns among NHS trusts in England, with potentially detrimental effects on key health services and the employees that provide them. Unite is concerned trusts are forming WOSs so they can register for VAT exemption and compete on a level-playing field with commercial competitors who register for VAT exemption for their work in the NHS, when NHS trusts can’t. However, the battle over WOSs is not all one sided as trusts in Leicester, Mid York, Leeds, North Bristol, and Tees Esk and Wear Valley have abandoned this flawed model. In each instance, local campaigns brought together staff and the community to declare that the NHS means an NHS and that WOSs are ‘sustainable’ and ‘commercial’ trust bosses will hive off services, such as housekeeping, estates’ management, equipment maintenance, catering, procurement and security to a WOS.

This is where these companies seek to make savings by short changing hard working staff and seeking to be more ‘commercial’ and ‘sustainable’ NHS companies. WOSs are the forefront of a much wider policy struggle over the future direction of the NHS and the disaster of the Health and Social Care Act 2012 which has led to health in England being further privatised and fragmented. While it is clear that the pace and the level of the attack on the NHS between Scotland and England is different, we should not deflect from the damage being caused to this most important institution by governments on both sides of the border. Therefore, we must call time on NHS privatisation where it is.

Jackie Williams is the national officer for health for the Unite union.
Making hi-tech a rule for revolutionaries

Linda Somerville argues the left can productively utilise tech against capital if its knows how

‘C
onsumer software on our computers and mobile devices has transformed how people organise their lives and their interactions with each other, and it is the new expanded terrain on which organising succeeds or fails.’ Becky Bond and Zack Exley, Rules for Revolutionaries (Chelsea Green Publishing, 2016 – see http://www.rulesforrevolutionaries.org/)

Over the years of attending political party or union conferences, I have often witnessed the scene where delegates gather in their tribes outside the hall to be advised how they should vote, making sure they ‘get the line’. Lack of confidence and youth meant I never felt able to challenge or even ask why some of these decisions were made – it was just ‘the line’. Attending a recent student conference, I watched hundreds of delegates endlessly check their phones as their heads dropped before every vote – not much change in tactics - just the line is now delivered by Whatsapp.

As a former software developer, I understand the immense opportunity that technology offers. Harnessing data and developing systems for societal common good has the ability to change, enhance and, literally, save lives. However, advancing technology has a chequered history with organised labour. The legacy of the short-lived, but bloody, Luddite rebellion remains as the term lives on and has evolved into the neo-Luddites of the present century. Social justice campaigners have often fared no better as technology raises concerns related to individual liberty, privacy and surveillance.

Alternatively, for capital, advancement of new technology has been essential as innovation has delivered ever increasing benefits that data-driven solutions, data management systems and mass communication channels offer. Becky Bond and Zack Exley provide the best of examples and a step-by-step guide to ‘big organising’ in their highly acclaimed book, Rules for Revolutionaries: How Big Organising Can Change Everything (distinctly named as the flip side to the 1930s organiser, Saul Alinsky’s Rules for Radicals). While Alinsky offers a model for organising based on escalating engagement and incremental wins – Bond and Exley declare: ‘if you want a revolution you have to ask for one’.

Their strategy revolves around making a big ask and their experience was people stepped forward in huge numbers to offer their time and money. Key to their strategy was a distributed network of volunteers who were empowered and trusted to get on with the job. And fundamental to making this work was their adoption of corporate customer relationship management databases. Tailoring the system with custom code wraparounds matched with online tools including Slack and Trello, they developed the infrastructure needed to enable thousands of volunteers to staff a virtual call centre making seventy-five million calls and sending eight million texts. service and local organising forums. This enabled them to build the Sanders movement and deliver financial and electoral wins way beyond anyone’s expectations.

However, using tech isn’t just reserved for the mammoth US presidential campaigns with a firm aim on the presidential election. It is currently playing a key role in the fight to protect democratic freedoms in Hong Kong which has seen over 25% of the population take part in demonstrations, protests and occupations, undeterred by the escalating state violence designed to intimidate, stop the protests and kill the democracy movement.

Challenging the tech-authoritarianism of China has meant protesters have had to go both low-tech and high-tech to avoid detection and build their movement. Moving off grid to ensure their location and identity cannot be traced, demonstrators have ditched their contactless payment cards, travel cards and phone contracts in favour of cash, single use travel tickets and pay as you go mobiles. Covering their faces with masks and goggles not only to protect them from tear gas attacks but also to prevent their images being captured which may allow facial recognition technology to trace and monitor them.

Utilising technology, they have adopted secure messaging apps, including Signal and Telegram, enabling the protest organisers to instantly call rallies, alert supporters to ensure they avoid trouble spots with heavy police presence and call for supplies of umbrellas, clingfilm and water to protect protestors at the front of the protests. Messaging apps have allowed online voting to direct protests with large scale participation in online groups taking votes at key moments to decide instantly if protesters should carry on with occupations, retreat or reconvene elsewhere.

Closer to home, Extinction Rebellion has been shaking up the summer with a range of non-violent civil disobedience stunts and demonstrations. Its ‘self-organising structure’ enables autonomous, small, local teams to build relationships to plan and deliver both independent and co-ordinated actions. Using encrypted applications including Whatsapp and Signal to instantly share information and collaborative tools, Slack and Matternost, for organising, the group members use the technology instinctively allowing them to pull knowledge from members that they have never met and make informed decisions in seconds.

None of this is a substitute for deep organising, building relationships and structures that stay beyond the rush of mobilisation, but technology must be seen as key to our progress. As tech rapidly develops campaigners can struggle to keep up. We need a network in Scotland to learn from each other, review tools and share hacks and tips – get in touch if you want to make this happen. And the best of it is we don’t even have to meet up to do this – we can Skype or even Zoom!

Linda Somerville is Director of NUS Scotland, a community campaigner and founding member of Save Leith Walk. You can follow Linda and direct message her on twitter – her handle is @lindasomerville
Reuniting the left in Scotland

Using his personal experience, longstanding activist, John Dennis, calls for the radical left to come together again

We face an uncertain immediate political future in Britain with various possible Brexit outcomes and a general election likely quite soon. This means we should have an opportunity to start making moves towards reuniting the left in Scotland. But with all the focus still on Brexit (and, therefore, Westminster and possibly the courts), there is no obvious mass campaign for the left this side of either Brexit happening or a General Election.

The successful launch of the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP) in 1998 by the Scottish Socialist Alliance was followed in 1999 and 2000 by a series of meetings in many of Scotland’s towns. This struck a chord with a layer of unaligned socialists. The first Scottish Parliament elections in 1999 had resulted in Tommy Sheridan becoming a Glasgow MSP (while Robin Harper, a right-wing Green, was elected an MSP in Edinburgh). Tommy Sheridan’s election was vitally important for the SSP’s growth, as it used his reputation from the anti-poll tax campaign that could attract people in towns like Dumfries with no previous SSP members. The Blair Government hadn’t yet invaded Iraq but was clearly anything but radical, having already ditched Clause 4 – the commitment to public ownership of the banks and main industries – from the Labour Party’s constitution. Thirty came to an SSP meeting in late 1999 and 14 of us joined on the spot.

It could be argued with hindsight that the SSP at the time relied too heavily on Tommy Sheridan and inadvertently created a personality cult around him. We can learn both good and bad lessons from the experience of that period. Times have changed a lot. Then there was hardly any online activity and very few had a mobile phone. The strategy of building branches around the turn of the century worked well for the SSP, as it was able to stand a full list of candidates throughout Scotland in the elections of 2001 (Westminster), 2003 (Holyrood – 6 MSPs returned) and 2005 (Westminster again). Credible campaigns were mounted for all three despite competition from the Greens. Then came the SSP/Solidarity split of 2006.

Thirteen years later and we should be able to turn the page on that. In electoral terms, the Greens have benefitted from the split and fratricide - and probably the SNP too as the Greens are often still seen by many on the left as essentially a party of eccentric middle-class people.

The experience of RISE in the last Holyrood election shows that the left is not capable of being an electoral force – and almost certainly won’t be in time for the 2021 Holyrood election. But a united left party – in a reborn Radical Independence Campaign, in the Extinction Rebellion movement, on anti-racist demos and opposing any possible Middle East or Latin American war – would be a strong counter-pull against the more parliamentary orientation of the Greens and the SNP.

The next step towards regaining that voice has to be for RISE and the SSP to unite as a New Scottish Socialist Party. I can’t think of a better title for a party that is prepared to engage in extra-parliamentary campaigns for independence, against austerity, against racism, for action on climate change and for working people fighting back against the vast inequalities in our sick society. The details of timing, structures, publicity etc will need to be worked on, but the decision in principle must be taken by the leadership of RISE and the SSP now.

John Dennis is currently Secretary of Dumfries TUC (though not writing in that capacity). He was formerly a member of the SWP (1971-1992), SSP (1999-2006) and Solidarity (2006-2008) as well as the EIS Secretary in Dumfries and Galloway between 2005 and 2017.
‘Old’ history for ‘new’ times – the Scottish Labour History journal

Ian Gasse reports on the relaunch of a valuable resource for all those concerning with the plight of workers’ struggles in Scotland

This year is the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of its first journal by the Scottish Labour History Society (SLHS). It is also a year in which the Society is launching a new website – at www.scottishlabourhistorysociety.scot – in a bid to introduce itself both to a wider audience and to younger generations of students, trade unionists, activists and others.

Labour history - the history of the organised working class and not of Labour - embraces the life and experience of working-class communities, their unions, friendly societies, political parties, co-operative societies and campaigning organisations over the two and a half centuries from the early beginnings of industrialisation to the present. It also includes the lives of individual men and women who emerged during this long history to help lead the collective struggle to create a more just and equal society - one in which working people can take their rightful place as full members of that society.

Over the fifty years of its existence, the Society’s journal, Scottish Labour History, has published almost 250 peer-reviewed articles – many by some of the subject’s leading scholars – which together provide a wide-ranging and detailed survey of the history of the organised Scottish working class over two and a half centuries. Through the new website, SLHS members can access digital versions of all these articles.

The articles range across the whole of Scotland – from the Highlands to the Borders; and across all the major industries – from agriculture to fishing, steelmaking to shipbuilding, textiles to motor manufacture, and coal mining to North Sea oil. There are also articles about the wider social developments realised by the Scottish working class – in health, housing, education, the women’s movement, and culture, as well as pieces about Scotland’s working-class politics.

For those who are new to the subject, labour history first flourished as a substantially ‘new’ area of historical study in the decades immediately following the Second World War, partly as a result of the work of the British Communist Party’s Historians Group. There had been some historians prior to that who had written about labour history; Sidney and Beatrice Webb, in the early twentieth century, published the first comprehensive studies of trade unionism and the co-operative movement; JL and Barbara Hammond, also in the first half of this century, wrote a series of books about working people during the early Industrial Revolution; and GDH Cole, writing in the mid-twentieth century, produced numerous volumes about the history of the working class and its economic and political aspirations, covering the period from the mid-C18 onwards. For Scotland, there was also Tom Johnston’s History of the Working Classes in Scotland (1920).

But the main expansion of the subject came in the three decades from the late 1950s onwards, heralded by the publication of Labouring Men by Eric Hobsbawm (1964), The Making of the English Working Class by Edward Thompson (1963), and the first volume of Essays in Labour History, edited by Asa Briggs and John Saville (1967). University and polytechnic history departments expanded to embrace the new area of study, and there was an accompanying growth in the amount of new research and the number of new publications on the subject.

The SLHS emerged as part of this expansion, being created as a separate entity after detaching itself from the Britain-wide Society for the Study of Labour History in 1966, and its establishment and continuation are the result of enormous dedication by numerous Scottish labour historians, but particularly, in the early years, by Ian MacDougall, WH Marwick, Hamish Fraser, JH Treble and Ian Wood. The present Society owes them all a considerable debt. The Society has also had regular support over the years from the Scottish TUC. The history of SLHS can be found in more detail in an article by one of its former chairs, Rob Duncan, on its website.

The new website is designed to help consolidate the Society still further, by attracting new audiences and bringing in new members. One of the aims is to make Scottish labour history – and the study of it – more accessible and accessible to a wider audience and, particularly, to younger people, who may be embarking on courses of historical study but who currently have limited knowledge of Scottish working-class history. Much of the site, which was developed with financial support from the Amiel & Melburn Trust, is available to non-members and features information about the Society, plus relevant news and events, bibliographies, blogs and links to other sites useful for the study of the subject.

And, visitors to the site can join the Society online through the website.

One further aspiration is that universities, colleges, academies, high schools — and Scottish Left Review readers! — will find the site helpful and recommend it to students and colleagues. Yet another is that the site will provide a point of access to Scottish working-class history for trade unionists and activists, in order to enrich their understanding of Scottish society, both past and present.

- Readers of Scottish Left Review can qualify for a 30% discount on a subscription to Scottish Labour History up to the end of November, by quoting the discount code SLR when joining the Society via the website.

Ian Gasse is web administrator for SLHS and is researching the history of the ‘organised’ working class of Dumfries, with articles published about both the local trade union and co-operative movements.
Iranian uranium – another instance of the world becoming more dangerous

Peter Lomas examines the dynamics behind the Iranian nuclear programme

The Iranian nuclear programme is attracting so much controversy in the news that it is to all appearances a deliberate approach to the ‘threshold’ of weapons-capability. Focused on uranium enrichment, it is the object of international diplomacy in the shape of the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) agreement. This treaty, signed under the US Obama administration and denounced by Trump, has effectively reduced Iranian nuclear activity and helped to lift economic sanctions imposed on the country after the fall of the Shah in 1979. But it remains dogged by US-EU differences and competition for continued Iranian compliance.

Uranium enrichment is the amassing of the radioactive isotope U-235, which occurs in nature at only 0.7% of the element. It is an industrial process to mine, leach, purify, superheat and sublimate (turn into gas) the raw uranium ore, then separate the gaseous isotopes and crystallise them into metal. The process is complex and laborious, with high hazards of toxicity, radiation and explosion. It is also extravagantly expensive. As one physicist pointed out: ‘A gram of purified isotope is considered a large amount in a biological laboratory. Only for uranium and hydrogen have people found it necessary to perform isotope separation on quantities of material measured in millions of kilograms.’

Vast amounts of electricity are required to power the final gaseous separations in fast-spinning, high-tensile steel centrifuges. Uranium metal produced containing 2-4% of U-235 can fuel nuclear reactors for up to a year. Metal with 80%+ of U-235 is weapons-grade. To scale up from 2% to 80% and beyond, one needs only increase the electrical power and multiply the collection points (the centrifuges), as Iranian engineers did secretly at Natanz until the International Atomic Energy Agency stepped in - Iran remains a signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

Iranian uranium enrichment was initiated, after 1979, using data and materials supplied by the Pakistani scientist, Abdul Qadeer Khan. Khan himself had stolen key centrifuge data from the Almelo fuel plant in eastern Holland, subsequently using it to develop Pakistani nuclear weapons (first tested in 1999). Since then he has given similar assistance to China, Libya and North Korea – by some accounts, for money; by others, to promote an ‘Islamic bomb’; perhaps simply through some Dr-Strangelove streak of megalomaniac mischief. He is certainly an international criminal on a grand scale, still living under the protection of the Pakistani government.

Nuclear research was originally condemned by the Iranian ayatollahs as the work of the devil, but the programme begun under the Shah has been expanded. The motive may once have been fear of a nuclear-capable Iraq led by Saddam Hussein, but that threat is long gone and, in any case, the current regime struggles to provide any rationale for its activity. The single IAEA-safeguarded nuclear reactor at Bushehr was completed in 2011 after sustained international opposition. But it also came with a full guarantee of Russian supplies of fuel under the NPT. Iran does not need uranium enrichment, or, arguably, nuclear energy at all.

Iranian oil reserves are among the largest in the world. This is a developing country technologically but not a poor one. Again, the low-carbon case for nuclear energy is defended by some environmentalists, but it has never figured in official Iranian declarations, even though the politician who worked hardest to extend the nuclear programme, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, built his own career on a reputation for ecology. Other nuclear facilities installed in Iran after 1979 were entirely unconnected to the civil system, including an outmoded model of reactor which produces large amounts of plutonium. (Enriched uranium was used at Hiroshima, plutonium at Nagasaki.)

The JCPOA, a joint US-EU-UN agreement, contains detailed plans to dismantle these facilities, and reduce Iranian uranium enrichment to a level commensurate with domestic production of nuclear fuel. The JCPOA is worth saving — unlike the Iranian regime; and that is the core of the problem.

The regime’s armed interference in Syria, Lebanon and Yemen is an attempt to burnish its revolutionary credentials, but domestically it has enjoyed scant support ever since it betrayed the promises of democracy and women’s liberation in its first years of rule. The lucrative personal properties in houses and landed estates; the pensions, the chauffeur-driven cars, and the seats in the rubber-stamp parliament — all are reserved for Iranian clerics, supported by their fanatical militias. The foreign hostage-taking under the guise of arresting spies; the seizure of foreign oil-tankers; the baiting of American governments; the aggressive posturing at the UN, and the manipulation of the nuclear programme — these are all stratagems to preserve a cruel and corrupt regime, in an increasingly unequal society.

In a war with the USA, however, as in the war against Iraq (1980-88), the regime would just as surely sacrifice millions of poor Iranians to save itself. There are also, in the USA, several million Iranian-Americans who are desperate to avoid a war with their relatives in Iran. The best outcome would undoubtedly be the downfall of the regime by peaceful means and the institution of democracy, as several popular uprisings have signalled. But in the short term the JCPOA agreement which the EU continues to support is the only hope for stability in the Gulf. This is also the logic of nuclear non-proliferation: new nuclear-armed regimes will only make nuclear disarmament in general harder to achieve.

Dr Peter Lomas is the author of ‘Unnatural States: The International System and the Power to Change’ (Routledge, 2017).
Elie of the mind: private schools and social closure

Chris Holligan unearths how class divisions play out in our supposed meritocratic educational system

This piece is stimulating by my experience holidaying in Elie this summer. Elie has a failed economy. Most of the properties are third or fourth homes. They are lived in for some of the summer period of the British public schools. Otherwise, it is a ghost town. These great properties are empty shells most of the year. Elie is typified by private school distinction and profound differences from the other end of the class spectrum along the coast (excluding St. Andrews during university term time). The periods of time these children spend over the vacation in Elie are thoroughly structured by sporting and reading activities. They continue to follow their parents' diligent pursuit of the cultural distinction formally initiated by their private education. It is fitting that Elie is represented by the figure of Lord Keen of Elie QC, Conservative Party politician and Advocate General for Scotland. Like many associated with Elie he lives in Edinburgh. He was educated at one of the oldest independent schools in the world.

In a sense, Elie is an adjunct to elite schooling. It is safe to drop it into carefully crafted conversation, unlike other coastal areas of Fife, the mention of which would be a faux pas unless clearly ironic. As I strolled about getting the odd ‘Good Morning’ or reluctant ‘Hello’, I realised I was moving within a very particular type of micro-sociology, one that has managed to become hegemonic despite its meagre quantitative size demographically. I began once again to think about class in Britain and myths around social mobility through educational attainment signalled by merely passing school exams.

Rarely was a recent Labour Party’s prime minister’s school background mentioned throughout his political career. Tony Blair received his ‘new’ Labour cultivation at Scotland’s Eton, Fettes College. It mattered to the wider appeal of his party that his elite and highly privileged educational credentials were a matter of some secrecy, before he took office, during his premiership and, indeed, afterwards. It is as if his credibility would be undermined in the eyes of the traditional working-class voter if it was to be known that his schooling was identical to Tory political elites. A Fettes heritage would have been one enabling factor of his access into Oxbridge and its circles of authority and old boy’s network. The iconography of the Independent Schools Council (ISC), the association of private schools, presents a vision of a type of quintessentially English class security, success and entitlement through its summer-time images of the game of cricket set in an idyllic rural landscape. Separation from the urban mass is important in recruiting affluent customers.

The hidden social worlds that private education nurture and promote do untold damage to the growth of meritocracy which even gaining a university education may never undo despite it seeming to symbolise class mobility. Even the renowned University of Durham claims to have discovered that in England students achieve more in independent than in state schools. And yet statistical demonstrations of difference rarely capture the deeper machinations that lie beneath these apparent sectoral differences.

George Simmel (1858-1918), the German sociologist of secrecy, drew our attention to the ways power requires secrecy to succeed and secrecy is also required for retaining power. Secrecy and disingenuous parental utterances are associated with their assiduous pursuit of private education. Secrecy is connected with maintaining the ‘right’ distance from others. Boundaries are impossible without secrets. Taboo exists in relation to some subjects, such as discrimination and negative views of groups or persons. Typically, stigma is connected with issues of colour and sexuality. For our purposes, parents exercise disingenuity so as not to present themselves as prejudiced against others - in this case those whose class status falls below them in the British class hierarchy. It would not be acceptable to say in public that you do not want your middle-class child to mix with their ‘inferior’, the working-class child. This subject is important at a time when social mobility in Britain is, at best, static and, at worse, reverted to a quasi-Victorian class hierarchy of entrenched life-chances and the narrowing of ambition this indicates. Hegemonic positions also require and necessitate losers.

The Sutton Trust education charity aspires to support a meritocratic order and advocates, like other well-meaning organisations, attaining the goal of a fairer Britain. Yet it is entrenched within the values of a received hierarchical class structure. The discourse of the ‘best universities’ - a euphemism found in this policy architecture by marginalising the post-1992 sector as tacitly inferior to the Russell Group (the so-called ‘best universities’) - by definition reinforces the likelihood that students in that sector, the majority are already from working-class origins, will be stigmatised and their employment prospects reduced, not to mention their class mobility.

Such is the pervasive nature of class that its institutionalisation helps it go unnoticed even within a higher education sector that we are all told opens up opportunities for all irrespective of their social origins. Gaining access to the ‘best universities’ is associated with the school a child attends - those entering the Russell Group are disproportionately privately educated. Privilege seeps through the highly porous boundaries of our systems of cultivation. Parents are strategists when it comes to educational choices as Professors Stephen Ball and Diane Rey, sociologists of education have discovered in their urban case studies of class choices. Operating as family CEOs, these parents are to be forgiven for spending large sums of money on their children who could easily be educated free at the point of charge by going to the local state school and in that way damage to the social fabric is avoided. Many parents opting into the private system are not rich. Instead, they perceive it as likely to guarantee a more positive future than their child would experience if educated through the state sector.

The City of Edinburgh is highly class
stratified by area of residence and schooling and presents an ideal case study for practices of prestige seeking and social distinction. Its financial industries provide employment for a high skills workforce, many of whom are recruited from the south of England where class structure and elite privilege are more apparent than in other parts of Britain. Many of the offspring of this constituency are likely to opt into the private sector which is accessible to their high salary base, and aspirations. Many are likely to have been schooled through selective education and desire that their children retain their position within that elite intergenerational mobility strata. Edinburgh has been identified by University of Edinburgh educational sociologists as a driver of social class mobility. As French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu, argued learning the ‘rules of the game’ is like most learning - best assimilated as early as possible. That ‘game’ entails knowledge of ‘distinction’, how to recognise it, and why it must be networked into - otherwise downward class mobility may occur.

Social divisions and their causes consume time and energy to perceive and understand. A friend of mine described a major fall out of two golfing friends who clashed on the subject of whether or not sending your children to a private school was a bad thing. Choices of that depth reverberate down the life span. They impact how you present yourself and how others regard you. Parents I’ve spoken to emphasise the benefits of the smaller class sizes in selective education and good standards of behaviour in classes. Rarely have they raised the issue of social network building and projecting their children into advantageous networks which they expect will aid them socially and in employment opportunities. Through financial investment in a private education, many different cards are being played. It represents a desire to acquire ‘distinction’ through prestigious symbolic capital which can be readily ‘cashed’ in due course. Staying outside the state sector is by implication the attempt to engineer who one’s children make friends with and through them class attitudes, values and ambitions. The parents of the middle-class child do not hold the ambition for their child to ‘learn a trade’ or to become ‘an apprentice’. There is more at stake than small class sizes in the decision of parents not to use their local state primary or secondary school. Bourdieu spent his academic life analysing these fundamental questions about social stratification and their maintenance through strategic behaviours, acquisitions of cultural markers of taste and the networks they are embedded within.

The ISC lists nine private schools in Edinburgh, some by repute are rated as more prestigious and in fact are more expensive. Its website uncritically references the controversial University of Durham’s research study setting out that independent education advances by two years (‘value added’) a student’s education compared with those attending a state school. For girls St. George’s situated at Ravelston Dykes prides itself on success at ‘sending’ girls to Oxbridge. Per term its boarding fees are a little below £10,000. Its current intake is 779 pupils. It has networked with the profit-making private university called the New College of the Humanities (NCH), in London, through an essay competition for which a St Georges school pupil was shortlisted in 2019. It costs a reputed £54,000 to take a degree there. The NCH, based in a prestigious leafy Bloomsbury Grade 1 listed five story Georgian townhouse worth millions of pounds, was founded by academic A.C. Grayling, the brother of the Tory MP Chris Grayling. Its critics (including the literary critic, Terry Eagleton) see it as an assault on public universities. The Tatler magazine, which claims in a recent issue to know about the ‘Royals’ is cited on its website. The Tatler targets the upper-middle to upper classes.

Along the road by several hundred yards and remaining in an area where house prices are exceptionally high there is Mary Erskine’s catering for 763 pupils. Catering traditionally for boys, Edinburgh Academy, founded in 1824, accepts 1115 pupils. Fees for the academic session 2019-20 were £14,823 for the senior school. Its nursery is £9,228 per academic year. Aiding its ‘distinction’ is the fact that its school motto is in Greek, ‘Excel Always’ is the translation, despite the fact that studying Greek has to be done by special arrangement and is extra-curricular, or as an after-school activity at the Academy. Private schools give special attention to badges of social distinction. That elitism is represented by an inclination to associations with ‘highbrow’ cultural markers such as the Tatler, and the NCH, as well as an iconography of classical buildings, classical languages and sense of entitlement. The passing of Highers - whatever the quality of these grades by state school pupils - will not make a strong dent into this exclusive social world. Edinburgh parents and those from outside who invest in its private school sector are simultaneously accepting a conservative right-wing vision of the political and cultural status quo.

It is the establishment of that confined and confining nature that they endeavour to emulate and to accommodate their children into - many parents will be its beneficiaries. It is foolish to believe that this culture will ever be challenged with a meritocracy despite it being a huge impediment to a meritocratic society. Our sportspersons, judges, dentists, doctors and vets, to name some leading groups that ‘benefitted’ from private education, will continue to dominate these positions however bright and hard working the student is from working-class origins. In Edinburgh, the visitor can see easily different social worlds by peering into passing 4x4s navigating Morningside Road on the ‘school run’ or by standing by bus stops as pupils from different schools crowd onto busses at the end of the school day. Such exclusively private and more public journeys mimic wider pathways sketched in this piece.

Chris Holligan is a professor in the School of Education at the University of the West of Scotland
XY Chelsea, 2019, 
director: Tim Travers Hawkins 
Reviewed by Jackie Bergson

Political and social relevance resounds sensitively and intensely within this documentary about whistle-blower, Chelsea Manning. XY Chelsea mainly arcs across the time between her release from prison in January 2017 and May 2019, when she was re-imprisoned for refusing to testify before the United States Grand Jury against others similarly accused of treason and conspiracy.

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Willy Slavin, Life Is Not A Long Quiet River: A Memoir, Birlinn, £12.99, 9781780275789
Reviewed by Donny O’Rourke

I don’t know if Slavin is ‘prole-ier than thou’ but he’s certainly holier than most. This troublesome priest, who will be eighty in January not only takes Jesus seriously - he takes him literally. Father Slavin, as he does not, on unimpeachable scriptural grounds, like to be called, used his small pension to buy a compact camper van - home as away – and sold all his worldly goods and went to live in a hermit’s hut, forsaking Glasgow for the Kingdoms of God and Fife. These are the backward glances of a diligent parish priest whose worldview refused to be parochial: the tale of a clergyman who then qualified as an educational psychologist; a chaplain to prisoners and hospital patients; a good doer rather than a do-gooder, whose role on important committees was manifestly committed, much to the benefit of old people, rough sleepers, drug users, those living with and dying from, HIV, and many others scorned, abandoned and impugned, since the sermon on the mount. In his overlapping vocational fields, no lily went unconsidered.

Slavin’s life has been joy giving, right living, liberation theology, combining theory and practice and theory in practice. It has amounted to a praxis of profound moral efficacy. In his militant detestation of poverty and the social, educational and cultural impoverishments it entails, he unapologetically admits to a Latin American-style, option for the poor. While ‘Marx + Jesus = Liberation Theology’ is far too simplistic a political or religious equation. Archbishop Helder Camara is quoted: ‘When I give food to the poor they call me a saint, when I ask why they are poor, they call me a communist.’

Glasgow University has for its mediaeval motto, ‘via, veritas, vita’. Slavin might well have lived his ministry under that exacting rubric. If Jesus is the way, the truth and the life, then to follow that way is quite simply to be that way. Put Christ back in Christmas? Sure! And, while we’re at it put Christ back in Christianity!

If you are looking for a nuanced meditation on the finer points of theology, this down-to-earth, yet heavenly, book will withhold such erudite insight. One glean a political outlook typical of many in austerity resistant, fascist fearing, culturally re-nascent Scotland: progressive, open, inclusive, well intentioned, in favour of broadening and deepening the compassionate consensus; ‘one of us’. If ‘there’s not much theology or ideology, this memoir, possessed of an unfussy, flowing, confidingly conversational style, has plenty of first-person parables to pass on.

A tripartite structure based on the (diocesan) priestly promises - not (monastic) vows - of obedience, poverty and chastity, nonetheless, allows a narrative arc to be described. This takes us from the author’s birth in England, in 1940, where his skilled engineer father was employed, through family, primary school and parish life in Penilee, close to the Rolls Royce factory his dad had eventually found war work in. And then onto secondary schooling, as a boarder at Blair’s College on Deeside, spiritual formation in the Scots College and Gregorian University in Rome, and studies at Glasgow, before a very varied series of postings, including a long stint in Bangladesh, where he became fluent in Bengali. Fellowships and networks let the him wander and chronicle in the journal he has maintained since boyhood. As an adolescent, his diary entries remained pure in thought, though the staff at the seminary explicitly proscribed ‘dangerous friendships’. Many of his classmates went on to seek heavenly bliss via the wedded sort. One sighs in sympathy at his poignantly candid confession of falling, platonically, yet passionately in love with women who might otherwise have become spouses. Slavin maintained his chastity by taking to the hills, conquering every Munro, and the highest peaks of England and Wales. These affairs of the soul reveal a great deal about his tender humanity and tenacious faithfulness to the undertakings he vouchsafed as a young man.

The memoir nearly shares its title with another movie that influenced the film fan, 1988 French comedy, Life is a long quiet river. And this life of service and work, even of readers who do not pray. For, as Walter Benjamin said: ‘attentiveness is the soul’s true prayer’. Slavin has paid attention. And its price.

Donny O’Rourke is a Glaswegian poet, journalist, television producer, university teacher, protesting Catholic and ‘faithiest’ who retains his belief in liberation theology and the pedagogy of the oppressed.

The James Connolly Reader, edited by Shaun Harkin, Haymarket Press, 2018, 9781608466467
Reviewed by Dave Sherry

Born to Irish immigrants in an Edinburgh slum, Connolly was driven into the army through poverty at fourteen, being sent to serve in Ireland. When he learned his regiment was being transferred to India, he deserted and returned to Scotland, becoming a Marxist ideas in Irish conditions. Poverty forced
him to immigrate to the USA where he played a key role organising in the labour movement. Returning to Ireland in 1910, Connolly was a key figure in the new Irish Transport & General Workers’ Union, helping lead the fight back in the Dublin Lockout of 1913. Wounded and taken prisoner in Dublin during Easter 1916, he was summarily executed by a British firing squad for his leading role in the Irish Rebellion.

Harkin shows Connolly as an original thinker and creative Marxist. His grasp of the relationship between national liberation, anti-imperialism and socialism, along with his understanding of the need for women’s liberation, were way ahead of their time. Connolly was true to his own maxim: ‘the only true prophets are those who shape the future’.

His major theoretical work, Labour in Irish History, is included in its entirety. Echoing Trotsky’s theory of permanent revolution, it argues ‘the fight for national liberty of any subject nation must, perforce, keep pace with the progress of the struggle for liberty of the most subject class in that nation’; that middle class nationalists in Ireland, ‘have a thousand economic strings … binding them to English capitalism’.

In a polemic that speaks to the situation in Scotland today as much as it did Ireland in 1897, Connolly warned: ‘If you remove the English army tomorrow and hoist the green flag over Dublin Castle, unless you set about the organisation of the Socialist Republic your efforts would be in vain. England would still rule you through her capitalists, her landlords, her financiers and the whole array of commercial institutions she has planted in this country’.

His undying commitment to Marxism was distorted after 1921 by Ireland’s new rulers: he was idolised as a nationalist martyr for Irish freedom, and sacrificed himself for the ‘cause of Ireland’ was widely popularised … Yet an understanding of Connolly’s Marxism is essential to appreciate his political outlook and strategy right through to the 1916 rebellion’.

As a union organiser in Belfast prior to the WW1, Connolly fought the scourge of sectarianism: ‘The Irish Catholic was despoiled by force. The Irish Protestant was despoiled by fraud. The spoliation of both continues today under more insidious but more effective forms, and the only hope lies in the latter combining with the former in overthrowing their common spoilers and consenting to live in amity together’.

The defeat in the 1913 Dublin lockout was followed by the threat of partition and the outbreak of war; these setbacks shaped Connolly’s final years. He could see the partition of Ireland – now agreed by the Tory Unionist establishment and the businessmen and landowners who led both the Unionist and Irish Home Rule parties - would mean ‘a carnival of reaction north and south’, securing the rule of both orange and green capital both sides of any border.

Connolly knew the carnage of 1914 was the outcome of a system based on competition for profits and empire but he believed the European socialist parties – the Socialist International – would live up to its pre-war resolutions and oppose the war. He even hoped the socialist movement would use its outbreak to foment general strikes in the belligerent nations and topple the system.

To his horror the socialist leaders of Germany, Britain and France lined up behind their rulers, swopping the language of socialism for national chauvinism. Yet Connolly remained steadfast; the only solution to war was revolution: ‘The signal for war should have been the signal of rebellion’. His anger and impatience propelled him towards the Easter Rising in 1916, hoping it would not only break British rule but that it would ‘set the torch to empires and dynasties and ending the slaughter. By early 1919 revolution had spread to Ireland itself.

This book is invaluable for anyone keen to learn from Connolly’s writings. Placed in context by the author’s concise and balanced introduction, he links them to Connolly’s tremendous political contribution as a union organiser, revolutionary socialist and anti-imperialist. A long time ago, Isaac Newton said, ‘the reason we can see much further is because we are standing on the shoulders of a giant’. As Harkin shows, while James Connolly was not infallible, he remains a giant for those who are out to fashion a better world today.

Dave Sherry is the author of recent books on the Russian Revolution (2017) and The First World War (2014) and is a member of the SWP.

Reviewed by Maggie Chapman

A lot has been written about the democratic foment of the Scottish independence referendum of 2014. This is not a book about that momentous period in our history. But it is firmly located in the Scotland created during the referendum. And that is why it is so important. James McEnaney’s book cannot be read without reference to the book from which it draws much inspiration, Edwin Muir’s Scottish Journey, published in 1935. In Scottish Journey, Muir recounts his journey around Scotland by the relatively new-fangled mode of the motor car. The ability for an individual to travel from place to place relatively easily was at the heart of Muir’s excellent book. It was new, and so it was interesting. Muir’s observational flair makes his book a pleasure - and one I would thoroughly recommend. McEnaney’s is also well worth the read. It is well written and insightful, and the use of a motorbike to make the journey gives it the same displacement as Muir’s 1930s readers must have experienced.

Muir’s experience was that of many in the early twentieth century: failure of the family farm prompted a move to the city, in his case, Glasgow. A series of family deaths left Muir with the sense that industrial Scotland was a form of hell. His journey is in search of a sense of what Scotland is in the 1930s. It was at this time that the ingredients for the social
democratic state of les trente glorieuses from 1945 to the mid-1970s were coming together. What makes McEnaney’s book a significant work is that it comes at a time of great transition. The remaining crisis-hit vestiges of the world Muir witnessed coming into being are under threat. The motor car, and its associated technologies, dominated the mid-twentieth century. They made travel easier, depleted the distinctiveness of place, compressed space and facilitated the creation of mass public services. Those mass public services are now the source of deep political contestation: on one side, advocates of universal services - the Scottish Radical Independence Campaign, Democratic Socialists in the US, the Corbyn movement; on the other, those who want to reverse the progress of the twentieth century - the right Brexiteers, Trump and demagogues like Brazil’s President Bolsonaro.

The 2014 referendum exposed a fault line in progressive thought - one that has resonance well beyond Scotland. The dominant mode of twentieth-century thought in Britain was that centralisation was a requirement of solidarity. This was often right for its time. The National Health Service is the crowning glory of this approach to politics. There is, though, another way. During the referendum, a great deal of attention was paid to Nordic models of social democracy. Where Scotland has the largest ‘local’ authorities in Europe, the Nordic countries have some of the smallest. As McEnaney points out Lesley Riddoch’s Blossom gives a thorough overview of the contrasting approaches to democracy.

And, this is significant because it seems that the Nordic model has taken the best of British social democracy and turned it into a model that is both more effective and more durable. Time after time at referendum debates, Labour politicians would point to the importance of maintaining the union to ‘show solidarity with workers in Newcastle, Liverpool and Manchester’. That is an argument of the twentieth century, and one that no longer resonates. And it does not resonate because of a decline in the idea that solidarity requires centralisation or, more specifically, requires bounding and containing by the notion of the state.

I, like many radicals, see my solidarity unconstrained by the borders of a state. For me, solidarity stretches well beyond the industrial cities of the north of England, to Kurdistan, to Palestine, to Venezuela, to Yemen and around the world. But that solidarity is no substitute for an actual lived engagement with those around us. Saying we must share a government to share solidarity is an argument that misunderstands not only what solidarity actually is, but also what government - and by extension, democracy - should be.

In A Scottish Journey, McEnaney does what nowhere near enough of our politicians do: he travels, stays with people he does not know, and talks to them about the issues that matter to them. Repeatedly those issues are about a lack of local control, a failure to understand the difference of place and a distance from power. It is this malaise that I believe is at the heart of our current political and economic crisis.

Possibly the most interesting development in the Scottish referendum campaign, and the one that unleashed a social movement unseen in the preceding 25 years, is the reclaiming of place. Along with this reclaiming of place comes the desire to redistribute power to those places; to free them from the shackles of ‘remote and ignorant government’, as Norman McCaig once described Westminster. McEnaney’s book speaks of the alienation and remoteness that the people he encountered on his journey feel.

But his journey does not end there: ‘Despite the inequality, alienation and frustration apparent all over the country there is also a sense of momentum, a feeling that change is coming ... Even amidst a battleground of entrenched political division, Scotland, against all the odds, feels ready to build a future’.

Maggie Chapman was a co-convener of the Scottish Green Party

**Jamie Woodcock, Marx at the Arcade: Consoles, controllers and class struggle,**

Haymarket, 9781642590142

Reviewed by Gordon Morgan

This is a fascinating book, which delves into the video games industry in all its forms. It takes us from the original games developed in the 1950s by the US military, through the popular personal computer (PC) and console games of the 1990s, to the massive modern games such as Assassins Creed and Fortnite. Along the way we meet Marx, in a special scene in Assassins Creed Syndicate, learn about the money it takes to make modern games and the rise in unionism amongst games developers. Finally, in a section on online play, we are introduced to the Gamergate movement, almost exclusively male and sexist which has close links to the alt-right and Steve Bannon, who is claimed to be creating a new right political force.

In 2017, the videogames industry generated revenues estimated as $108bn. The top grossing company is Chinese firm, Tencent, with turnover of $18bn, equaling the turnover of the second and third companies combined. Another Chinese company, NetEase, is the sixth largest. China is gradually taking over from the US and Japanese console makers. Games themselves have shifted from upfront costs to making money from extra purchases to distinguish or reward players. In 2017, there were 7,672 games released on Steam, which has cornered the market for downloadable games and mods. The links between some games and the military are all too real, with a recruitment advert for the British Army featuring an unbranded Xbox flying a drone. This form of ‘militainment’, involves state violence being translated to an object of pleasurable consumption. Other games feature weapons actively placed by arms manufacturers in return for paying royalties, but only so they know the ‘good guys’ will use them.

For those who work in games development, such as in Scotland, the use of Non-Disclosure Agreements is increasingly common. Much work is now outsourced, to ‘below the line’ workers across the world each of who carries out repetitive work. Of the above the line workers, largely male, 54% receive over $50K and 15% over $75K in salary per year. Bonuses are also common. As games have grown, work is carried out in up to 10 development studios across the world. This leads to alienation, and is against the anarchistic tendency of early games developers around 80% of whom are under 35. Union organisation is at an early stage with major steps being taken forward in 2018, with the establishment of Games Workers Unite. There is much more in the book, read it to find out.

Gordon Morgan is a member of the Scottish Left Review editorial committee
We live in such volatile times that it is distinctly possible that every word of this column will be either irrelevant or out-of-date or both by the time you are reading it.

It is Wednesday 28 August 2019, as I am finishing off this piece, and Boris Johnson has just asked the Queen to suspend Parliament so that he can railroad through his insane plan to force through a ‘no-deal’ Brexit.

Hopefully, by the time this copy of Scottish Left Review is published, something will have been done to stop this happening. Hopefully, by then, Boris Johnson will no longer be Prime Minister. It is a mark of how uncertain and fast-changing Britain’s political landscape has become, that either outcome is a distinct possibility.

Imagine if you had been in a coma for ten years and woken up during the G7 summit at the end of August. You would be utterly perplexed and not a little shocked to find that the buffoon who had somehow managed to be elected Mayor of London was now Prime Minister of Britain, shaking hands with the orange-tanned sex-pest reality TV presenter who is the President of the USA. The chances are that you would either assume that the hospital had put you on mega doses of mind-bending medication or, more probably, that you would ask to be voluntarily returned to blissfully ignorant comatose state from which you had just emerged. The only missing piece of this jigsaw of hellish outcomes is Prince Andrew ascending to the throne. Of course, by the time you read this, enough members of the royal family may have been wiped out in some freak accident (perhaps, being driven in a car by Prince Phillip) to allow such a nightmare to become reality.

Even five years ago, the world looked very different. In 2014, if Scots had been told if they voted ‘No’ in the independence referendum that in five years’ time we would be dragged out of the EU, that Boris Johnson would be Prime Minister and that Parliament would be suspended, that vote would have had a totally different outcome. I reckon even Ruth Davidson would have voted ‘Yes’ presented with that scenario.

Even last year, the very prospect that Jacob Rees-Mogg would be a member of the cabinet would have been laughable. Indeed, a government containing both Johnson and Rees-Mogg would have seemed unthinkable in January. Moreover, even in his most fevered imagination, it is unlikely P.G. Wodehouse would have thought up a plot line where a pair of idiotic upper-class pantomime baddies were in charge of the country.

A matter of months ago, we were told that ‘no deal’ was the worst-case scenario. That was before Michael Gove was put in charge of ‘no deal’ preparations. Now, the worst-case scenario is Michael Gove in charge of ‘no deal’.

Yet again, Gove has ended up in a job to which he is totally unsuited. His previous post was Environment Secretary. Michael Gove to me is almost like the human embodiment of toxic waste - he looks like he been fracked. His previous job in cabinet was as Education Minister. The guy looks to me as if he should legally not be allowed within a one-mile radius of a primary school.

Johnson has, of course, only shown his face in Scotland once since taking office, and was met with a torrent of boos, catcalls and abuse when he arrived to meet Nicola Sturgeon at Bute House. If he ventures North again, which is highly unlikely, the level of resentment is likely to go right off the scale.

In Scotland, even the Conservatives hate Boris. The chances are that a huge proportion of the crowd that booed Boris in Edinburgh were Scottish Tories. I reckon if Ruth Davidson was asked to name the politicians whose images she would want made into voodoo dolls, BoJo would almost certainly be top of her list. She’ll have plenty of time to make up that voodoo doll of him from the backbenches now!

Hopefully, by the time you read this, the Commons will have passed legislation preventing a ‘no deal’, or a vote of no confidence in the PM, or both. The idiot needs to be stopped from subjecting the entire nation to this grotesque act of self-harm.

‘No deal’ is now the Government’s only policy on Brexit. But what ‘preparation’ has been made with two months to go? The only obvious preparation it is making is in announcing that is going to recruit more police. However, the proposed twenty thousand extra coppers are going to be totally inadequate to handle the outbreak of civil unrest that will ensue if we crash out of Europe without a deal on Hallowe’en. That is the one thing than can predicted with any degree of certainty.

VLADIMIR McTAVISH'S

Kick up the Tabloids

Vladimir McTavish
Scotland’s leading human rights lawyer, Aamer Anwar, to give 2019 Jimmy Reid annual lecture

The Jimmy Reid Foundation, in conjunction with the University of Glasgow, is delighted to announce that Scotland’s leading human rights lawyer, Aamer Anwar, is to give the seventh Jimmy Reid annual lecture on 10 October 2019. The lecture will take place from 6.30pm onwards.

Currently, Aamer is the Rector of the University of Glasgow, as Jimmy Reid was in the early 1970s, and will give the lecture in the Bute Hall where Jimmy gave his famous rectorial address in 1972 called ‘Alienation’ and known as the ‘rat race is for rats’ speech.

The title of Aamer’s lecture is ‘The struggle for justice, equality and freedom in Scotland’. In it, he will not only discuss the state of justice, equality and human rights in Scotland but also examine how the battle for these can be pursued in the face of opposition from the Scottish establishment.

Tickets are on sale here – http://reidfoundation.org/7th-2019-jimmy-reid-annual-memorial-lecture-tickets-now-on-sale/