There’s no snooze button for the Left anymore... so what do we do now?
Hoping and dreaming of a red Xmas

Britain has had a tradition of khaki elections – like those in 1900, 1918, 1945 and 1983. Khaki elections are those where the influence of wars to come, ongoing wars or wars just finished is the determining factor in deciding the outcome. Sometimes it can represent a shift to the right like 1983 or a shift to the left like 1945. It would not be out of place to suggest that the 2019 general election could be seen as something similar because Brexit has been like a multi-faceted civil war without guns, whether this be within Britain as a whole, within political parties or amongst the left and the unions.

The outcome of this general election could be critical and catastrophic for many years to come if the Tories are returned with a working majority (which could be as high as 50). Under this scenario, Johnson’s Brexit deal will be passed and Britain’s exit from the EU will take place on 31 January 2020 or shortly before. Polling for since the summer has suggested this is a probable or more than likely outcome – and where the votes of the DUP would no longer give it leverage it had before and especially now that it is angered by Johnson’s proposed Brexit.

Polls involve asking hypothetical questions about voting intentions at particular points in time. On this basis, they are not the best indicators of how voters will vote come an actual election, especially where the campaign itself may have a bearing on how people decide to cast their vote. Polling for the 2015 and 2017 general elections was badly wrong, first suggesting Labour would win a working majority and then suggesting the Tories would win a working majority.

Many believe that the combination of Corbyn, the groundwork for Corbynism and the obligation within election guidelines for radio and television to give Labour more of a fair airing explained why Labour did so well in 2017 when this was not expected. In that sense, no polling can predict what will happen in an election period based upon data collected in a non-election period.

So, the left must not just hope for but also work for either a Labour government in its own right or one where the SNP supports Labour on a confidence and supply basis. This is the reason for the dream of a red Christmas. The reasons are fairly self-evident in terms of what further wreckage the Tories would wreak on working people and the working poor by increasing economic and social inequality and by contrast what amelioration of existing economic and social inequality Labour could bring about. Though Johnson promises more spending on the NHS, it is clear this investment it is not substantial enough in the NHS to meet the scale of its underfunding and nor is it available to other parts of the public services. Amongst other things, Labour is promising to end austerity, invest in public services and infrastructure and provide workers with the means to reduce the imbalance of power in workplace.

But sober analysis of the situation in 2019 does not make it look likely that it will be a re-run of 2017 or anything similar for some obvious reasons. First, the frustration about not ‘getting Brexit done’ is palpable – this was not the case in 2017. Second, Johnson is a far better political operator and campaigner than May. And third, Corbyn is no longer the new kid on the block’ as he was and who talked about doing a new and gentler form of politics. Labour will find it hard to get traction for its non-Brexit agenda on austerity and inequality. Although it now has a pitch of ‘improve the terms of any Brexit deal and then put this to the people in a referendum’, this position has taken such a long time to get to - as it tried to straddle the divide of its ‘remain’ and ‘leave’ supporters – that it has left many of its disillusioned ‘remain’ and ‘leaver’ supporters considering voting SNP or LibDem or Conservative respectively.

Yet, we should also not totally discount the possibility though that the political paralysis could continue, whereby the division over Brexit is an equally balanced one and which leads to another hung parliament. This would severely test the standing of parliamentary democracy in Britain.

Returning to Brexit proper for the moment, whatever type of Brexit we’ll get under the Tories, it will be one for further deregulation and more neo-liberalism, especially if the basis of Brexit is World Trade Organisation (WTO) rules. It is a terrible indictment of the overall current state of politics that anybody remotely on the left could succumb to Brexit frustration so that they support the ‘get Brexit done’ mantra of Johnson and the Tories. This is because it is clear that Johnson’s renegotiated deal opens the way to a much looser relationship with the EU than envisaged by May, and allows for more ‘divergence’ with EU regulations. As the Financial Times (26 October 2019) reported, you only have to see that with the issue of the protection of workers’ rights and the environment...
having been moved from the legal text of the withdrawal agreement and being put instead into the political declaration (which has no legal force). Thus, there is no longer any assurance on these 'level playing field' commitments. In practice, it will be up to the government that negotiates the free trade deal to decide how strong a commitment to EU rules it is prepared to make.

Brexit is, of course, not the only issue for the left. The death of 39 migrants in a cold storage truck is a barbaric condemnation of the neo-liberal type of world we now live in – desperate people took desperate measures to pursue a better life, thousands of miles away from their families and friends. A better world would not see people compelled to do such things nor allow others – the traffickers – to profit from their desperation and misery. The free flow of labour – better put as people’s right and ability to move freely as they wish – is something that neither the proposed Treaty Brexit nor the EU look favourably upon. It heartbreakingly remains the safe preserve of the rich.

The jailing of the Catalan independence leaders is another barbaric act. But we cannot just condemn this. Unless and until independence movements take the struggle directly to the source of the respective problem – the power structures and vested interests based in the capitals of London and Madrid for our purposes here – it will remain the case that demonstrating (and striking) in Edinburgh or Scotland or Barcelona or Catalonia is necessary but at the same time wholly insufficient. Better to do so in London or Madrid. Without suggesting that such mass mobilisations can easily constitute the magic panacea, putting millions on the streets in those capitals would send a far stronger message. Demonstrating in Edinburgh or Barcelona can more easily be ignored by the powers that be. That should be a lesson for the new radical group in Catalonia called ‘Tsunami Democràtic’ or ‘All Under One Banner’ in Scotland. Indeed, this tactic would seem to be needed no matter what happens in the forthcoming general election. If the Tories win, gaining a Section 30 order to hold a lawful independence referendum will not be forthcoming. If Labour was to win (albeit as a minority government reliant upon SNP support), the speed at which a Section 30 order would be granted and for which would be granted for will be the main issues.

The SNP as the primary political party of independence has a problem here. It has never organised such extra-parliamentary action and barely supports those that do. The independence rally organised by the SNP in George Square in Glasgow on 2 November 2019 was very much the exception and not the rule. Yet if, as predicated, it has a replay of its 2015 success, the SNP leadership strategy of pleading for a Section 30 order will be shown to be ineffectual. It will then have its own version of the ‘feeble fifty’ like Labour had in the 1980s.

Extinction Rebellion (XR) scored something of a rather spectacular own goal at Canning Town tube station in London on 17 October. Stopping commuters getting to work on public transport seemed to be very badly misjudged. But what was intriguing about this was that this type of action has happened before in the April 2019 XR mobilisations but without the same reaction from commuters. It was that angry reaction that facilitated the media’s attack on XR following the smear from Johnson that they were ‘crusties’. XR’s leadership – called its political circle – will need to be a lot more streetwise in future if it is to not only keep the momentum on the issue pushing forward but also stop it from falling backwards.

In this issue of Scottish Left Review, we have articles on Brexit, independence and climate change plus a host of other issues. As we did not know whether a general election would be agreed to be held to when we decided upon the theme for this issue, we choose not to make our theme for that issue and instead around these other aforementioned issues. When we have our first issue published in 2020, we will be able to reflect upon the outcome of the first winter election since 1923 and what this means for the left – as well as what the left should then do now.
Brexit election tracker – at long last, the election is on!

Matthew Goodwin reveals the major trends trajectories to look out for in the run up to 12 December

Britain is now set for what will almost certainly be the most consequential general election in its entire post-war history. The fate of Brexit, a second referendum, Boris Johnson’s embryonic premiership and Jeremy Corbyn’s radical Labour project all hang in the balance. This is why — amid the Brexit turmoil and a deeply polarised electorate — the 2019 general election offers something to everybody. As Richard Nixon once said: ‘There’s nothing wrong with this country which a good election can’t fix!’

The election on December 12 will be Britain’s 22nd general election since 1945. But it will also be the fifth nationwide election to be held in only four years. After the 2015 general election, 2016 referendum, 2017 general election and 2019 European elections, the British people would perhaps be forgiven for boycotting this one altogether. This remarkable turbulence reflects not only the immense volatility that is sweeping through British politics but also the extent to which the ‘Europe question’ has cut across traditional parties, pushed parliament into gridlock and turned one of the world’s most stable two-party systems into a state of continual flux. So, to try and make sense of the election let’s take a quick look at the polls, the voters, the parties and the seats.

Treat polls with a pinch of salt. But right now, at the start of the campaign, they tell a pretty clear story. Average public support for the Conservatives is 38%, Labour 24%, the LibDems 17%, the Brexit Party 12% and the Greens 4%. If these numbers hold then we will be Britain’s 22nd general election and 2019 European elections that were held between 2010 and 2017 nearly 50% of the overall electorate did not vote for the same party. Tribally loyal voters are not facing the threat of extinction but they are increasingly rare. ‘My father voted Labour and his father voted Labour’ is moving into the history books as we continue to move into what political boffins call the era of ‘dealignment’ —much weaker relationships between the main parties and voters. This is one of several big macro-trends that points to the wider phenomenon of geo-political volatility. With the most recent two elections, 2015 and 2017, being the most volatile in modern times, it is also a reminder for why only a fool would make a confident prediction about what will happen in December. British voters are increasingly ‘up for grabs’, shopping around the political marketplace like consumers. And they are not just thinking about Brexit. They want to talk about the NHS and crime and are deeply pessimistic about the direction of the economy. Many aspects of ‘Corbynomics’, such as nationalisation, putting workers on company boards and increasing taxes for high-earners, are also very popular. We hear much about this being a ‘Brexit election’ but do not forget one of the key lessons of 2017: the left-right divide still packs a hard punch.

One irony is that ever since Britain voted to leave the European Union, our politics have looked more and more European. A once stable two-party system has basically imploded into a four-party race. Fragmentation and a resurgent populism are the specials of the day. But the parties have changed too. This election is interesting because it will most likely define the legacy of two recent political projects: Jeremy Corbyn’s more radical left-wing project and Boris Johnson’s attempt to revive and rewire one-nation conservatism. Only one of these can emerge victorious. Corbyn needs to reassemble his 2017 Labour electorate which we can see he is already trying to do by turning up the volume on environmental protection, warning about the alleged ‘privatisation’ of the NHS, detailing backroom discussions between ‘the Tories’ and big pharma, and underlining Labour’s commitment to hold a second referendum. Johnson, meanwhile, faces a different challenge; he needs to hold on to the existing Conservative territory while ideally breaking new ground in ‘Leaveland’ by talking about regional inequality, the NHS, rebooting the northern powerhouse and speaking ever more loudly to blue-collar Britain. Corbyn knows that he needs to find a way of holding up the Labour vote in ‘Leaveland’ while reaching further into ‘Remainia’. Johnson knows that he needs to fend off these challengers in ‘Remainia’ while also marching much further into ‘Leaveland’ than Theresa May who, in the end, only captured six pro-Brexit seats from Labour.

With the seats, there is a clearly identifiable path to a majority for Boris Johnson. But it is not as easy as some think. The SNP continues to control much of Scotland, Labour holds big majorities in the North, is dominant in London and has been spreading further into the southeast. The Liberal Democrats are resurgent, bearing down
on Tory MPs in nearly 30 seats where they are second. And, the Brexit Party could still cause problems. This is why so many in the Johnson camp are looking squarely at Labour seats that voted for Brexit. If Johnson’s planned invasion of Labour territory can go as far as seats like Wolverhampton North East, which last went Tory in 1987, or Stoke-on-Trent North, which has never been held by the Conservatives in the post-war era, then a wave of other pro-Brexit Labour seats will likely turn blue, from Dudley North to Barrow and Furness, from Ashfield to Bishop Auckland. A strong majority would likely follow.

But what if this does not happen? Throw in a decent Labour Party campaign and a strong challenge from the Brexit Party and it is not hard to see how seats that the Conservatives won only two years ago - like Mansfield, Copeland, Walsall North and Stoke-on-Trent South – could flip back into the red column while other highly marginal seats, like Thurrock or Southampton Itchen, fall the same way.

A different dynamic will be playing out in ‘Remainia’ where Conservatives will need to implement a defensive strategy to stop Labour from taking too many seats. There are nearly 40 Conservative seats that voted ‘remain’ in the referendum, or are very marginal ‘leave’ seats, where incumbent MPs have a majority of less than 10 points. Johnson simply has to stop the ‘Revenge of Remainers’ from crashing through these seats, from Pudsey and Chipping Barnet to Milton Keynes and Watford. Others, like Hastings and Rye, or East Worthing and Shoreham, have probably moved clearly to ‘remain’ due to population churn. Then come the LibDems. Remember, one key reason why David Cameron won a surprise majority in 2015 was because he captured nearly 30 seats at Nick Clegg’s expense. But this time around, it is the LibDems who are looking for revenge in seats like St Albans, Richmond Park, Cheltenham, Lewes and Cheadle. Johnson has to fend off this challenge and shore up his ‘Blue Wall’ in the southwest where ‘leave’ seats like Cornwall North and Devon North will also come under threat. And then come SNP-Conservative battlegrounds. Two years ago, more than half of all seats that were gained by the Conservatives came at the expense of the SNP. But today it looks likely that some of these will be lost. Eight seats, such as Stirling or Gordon, could easily fall to the SNP on a swing of less than 5 points. For this reason alone, Johnson will be well advised to think about how to revive his offer to unionists and ‘leavers’ north of the border. In short, Prime Minister Johnson’s path to a majority is clearly visible but it is also one that is littered with obstacles and potential pitfalls. Can he pull it off? Time will tell and we won’t have long to wait.

Matthew Goodwin is Professor of Politics and International Relations at the University of Kent and is the lead organiser of the Brexit Election Tracker (see http://www.matthewjgoodwin.org/brexitelectiontracker.html). This article is a version of the Brexit Election Tracker bulletin released on 31 October 2019.

John Kay, communist stalwart

It is with sadness that we note the death of John Kay, aged 94. He was one of the founders of the Scottish Left Review. With a wide range of contacts, he was instrumental in getting us subscribers, many of whom are still reading the magazine today. He served on the Editorial Committee for over 10 years where his wise advice and particular knowledge of the trade union movement were invaluable. From a working-class family in Glasgow he gained a scholarship to Allan Glen’s School but left at 14 to take up an apprenticeship as a draughtsman. He emigrated to New Zealand in the early 1950s. Back home by the late 1950s, he became Scottish Industrial Organiser of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) for which he worked until 1989. In this role he was an election agent and also the Communist candidate in the Queen’s Park by-election in 1982. At the CPGB Congress in 1991 which led to a split, he supported the Eurocommunists to change the organisation’s name to the Democratic Left in which he was active for a number of years. This split and fall out with many comrades of long standing caused John much sadness. Dapper, well read, good conversationalist, fine singer, concert and theatre goer, he lived life to the full and his mind was still active to the end. He and his wife Helen, another stalwart of the movement had just celebrated their 65th wedding anniversary. They had two adopted children, Jackie and Maxwell. Jackie is a well-known poet and author who until recently was Scotland’s Makar – a chip of the old block! The labour movement has lost a fine comrade and a lovely human being.

Bob Thomson
Socialism in Scotland for the 21st century

Richard Leonard believes the case for an economic and environmental transformation can be won

There is widespread discontent and it is growing, with school pupils striking and young people, some of whom have no vote but who have a voice that demands to be heard and listened to, taking to the streets. Across all generations, there is a rising determination, which our representative democracy needs to better reflect, on the need for a new urgency of action and a renewed vitality in our thinking on the need for real change. People are tired of a status quo where the idle rich get richer and the working poor get poorer. This is not just the view from Scotland. It is the view from right across these shared islands.

The challenge presented by the climate emergency can only be met by putting unions and communities at the centre of a ‘just transition’ which is part of a wider industrial strategy built upon a national economic plan. It has long been my view that - above all else - democratic socialism is about the creation of an economy run for the many not simply for the few at the top. It is about the establishment of democracy in the economy and the building of an equal society. So, now more than ever it is time for democratic renewal and a redistribution of wealth and power.

Exactly twenty years on from the enactment of devolution, we still have a centralised state and an imbalanced economy. When I became Leader of the Scottish Labour Party, Jeremy Corbyn and I agreed that there was a need for renewed and serious consideration about Scotland’s future constitutional options. This work is underpinned by our shared socialist analysis of the pivotal nature of the distribution of power as well as wealth, and our shared values of the fundamental importance of power being exercised at the most appropriate level. Three years of Brexit have brought this into ever sharper relief.

The Scottish Labour Party wants the UK to stay in the European Union and Scotland to stay in the UK. So, we are the only party in Scotland offering both the prospectus of remain and reform in both. I want to see fewer borders not more. We want to bring people together rather than tear them apart.

And our history tells us that basic inequalities will not be tackled, and economic, social and environmental justice cannot be won, unless we construct a society on the values of democracy and on the enduring principles of socialism. A critical step on this road is the election of a radical transformative Labour Government led by Jeremy Corbyn as Prime Minister. The Labour Government’s programme will radically transform Scotland with a £70bn investment plan and a new £10 per hour minimum wage - regardless of age. It will act to boost rights for workers in the economy and the workplace.

Economic and industrial planning is required to transform Scotland’s economic performance. If we are to make the change that is so badly needed, it cannot be done according to the central tenets of neo-liberal economics, namely, the old ideas of privatisation, austerity and rolling back the state. It cannot be done, either, through a continued overreliance on imported goods and services, on foreign direct investment or on multinational financial and corporate interests.

Instead, we need an innovative state. That means – at a Scottish level – using the powers that the Scottish Government has in procurement, planning, licensing and investment.

It means establishing a properly capitalised national investment bank in order to secure through public investment and equity stakes the economic rebalancing that we need including growing the size of our manufacturing base, and stimulating locally-owned and worker-owned businesses. It also means investing in new forms of common ownership—co-operative ownership, municipal ownership and public ownership.

I remain optimistic that we can make the leap and the transformative change that we need with a planned transition - a democratic transition and a just transition - so that the very economic foundations of society become much more democratic, much more accountable and much more sustainable. Because the struggle that we face to halt climate change and save the planet is, in the end, a struggle for social, economic and environmental justice. It is a struggle that not only can be won it is a struggle that must be won.

Richard Leonard is the leader of the Scottish Labour Party and an MSP for Central Scotland. He was previously a union officer for the GMB union and STUC.
Time to stuff the Tory turkey

Tommy Sheppard believes Scotland will answer the call but is hesitant about calling the result elsewhere

By the time you read this we may be in the middle of a general election - or not. If not, there’ll be one along soon. Either way, it’s worth reflecting on how this early election came about and the opportunity it presents for the left in Scotland. We shouldn’t be having an election, of course. The Fixed Term Parliaments Act 2011 was meant to avoid just that. It was supposed to be five-year parliaments so everybody knew were they stood, and the advantage of incumbency removed. But that was before the British ruling class started eating itself alive over Brexit and this most enduring of crises drove a ‘coach and horses’ through previous party loyalties. A populist campaign to leave the European Union galvanised multiple discontents and created an abyss where once there was certainty. And when parliament stared into the abyss, it didn’t like what it saw.

The promise of Brexit was a lie. It isn’t possible to leave and for things to get better. Sure, the UK can take back its borders and be done with Johnny Foreigner, but only by making people worse off. This realisation combined with the steadfast decision of the Tory government to consult no-one but itself on how to get Brexit done has created a stalemate with parliament simply unable to move forward.

The hard right has taken advantage of this inertia. Driven by the fuel of frustration, it sees an opportunity to get through the hardest of Brexits. This is the Johnson project - a withdrawal agreement that paves the way in 14 months for the emergence of a free trade agreement aligned with the US rather than the EU. Gone will be the frameworks which oblige capital to accept social and environmental restraints - to be replaced by deregulation and the greater freedom to exploit.

This is dangerous, and it needs to be stopped. But this parliament cannot do it. There are too many - mainly Labour - MPs constrained by out of date mandates which promised to implement Brexit without knowing the cost. Some are already voting with Johnson, arguing any deal is better than no deal. They have neither the inclination nor the courage to argue the obvious alternative - no Brexit.

So, we need a new parliament with fresh mandates capable of resolving Brexit. More importantly, it is surely time the people of Britain are allowed a say again. And that’s why the SNP has insisted that there must be an election before anyone ‘gets Brexit done’. After all what is the point of having an election occasioned for the most part because the parliament cannot decide between versions of the Brexit end game, but then closing down the debate before the first vote is cast.

The new parliament should decide the final chapter of Brexit - whether agreeing the deal or asking people to rethink the whole thing through another referendum.

The left should seize upon the chance to rid Britain of the most right-wing government since the Second World War. And yet the reticence of some in the Labour Party is astonishing. It is not a good look for those who argue for change not to want to contest an election. Once we are clear the Tories are blocked from using the calling of an election to railroad through a hard Brexit, we should be all systems go.

I can appreciate how some Labour MPs in leave seats will be seduced by the argument ‘let’s get Brexit done’ - they would rather fight on anything other than the issue which has split their electorate down the middle. But it is a mistake. If Brexit gets done, the right will unite and Johnson will take credit for moving it on. Brexit not being done means the end is still in doubt and Johnson will be attacked by Farage. Frankly, in many parts of provincial England, this it pretty much Labour’s only route to victory. If Brexit gets done, Corbyn is f***ked.

Labour is behind in the polls, but it was the last time too. The public do seem to have a problem with the Labour leadership, but it is what it is. It’s not plausible for Labour MPs to argue to postpone an election because they are concerned about their leader. And it’s not fair on the rest of us.

One of the more bizarre arguments coming from the right wing of Labour is that by calling for an election the SNP will somehow be responsible if Labour loses it. Come on! The logic of that is that we should spend our time propping up a minority Tory government. How is anyone taking this seriously?

The SNP will take care of the Tories in Scotland - it is not our responsibility to defeat them in England. Which brings me back to what this election is all about. For in Scotland, the whole constitutional crisis of Brexit is overlaid with a longer running argument about Scotland’s place within Britain. We have a chance not just to stop Brexit, not just to oust Johnson and the Tories, but also to support the proposition that people here have the right to choose an alternative future. We shall be putting that front and centre in the coming campaign. And if we win, it will mandate SNP representatives to advance that argument in the Palace of Westminster making it a red line in any discussions about what support we might give to a non-Tory British government.

Tommy Sheppard is the (SNP) MP for Edinburgh East

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Daunting challenges posed by global capitalism

Colin Fox surveys the landscape and get prepared to batten down the hatches

I voted to remain in 2016 as ‘The lesser of two evils’ but I’ve changed my mind. Reading Costas Lapavitsas’s The Left case against the EU on holiday in Bilbao recently caused me to reflect on my choice and on the issues Scottish Left Review has asked us to comment upon. In my revised view, the EU is an organisation beyond progressive reform. Whilst I acknowledge the 2016 referendum was not driven by the left, the past three years have also shown how malevolent a force the EU is today. Its neo-liberal practices reach far and wide and its political spokesmen have worked non-stop to thwart their biggest defeat in 70 years.

I never doubted Brexit would happen however. The implications of the vote were too profound for it not to. The majority voted to leave and their instruction had to be adhered to. And the ‘no’ vote in 2014 kept Scotland locked into that reality.

EU sycophants like Nicola Sturgeon, Keir Starmer, Tom Watson and Jo Swinson had no intention of accepting the result, happy to pedal myths of all kinds as Brussels directed them. They argued for example the 2016 vote itself would lead to economic catastrophe. It didn’t. Further predictions of looming economic Armageddon followed. Each proved just as inaccurate. They even blamed the collapse in car sales on Brexit when it had nothing to do with it. The fall in UK diesel exports for example was driven by global concern over CO2 emissions and lethal particulates.

As a consequence of the UK establishment’s Brexit skulduggery, I fear Boris Johnson is going to win the forthcoming election, painting himself as ‘The people’s champion’! ‘Leave’ voters and the ‘scunnered middle’ sick and tired of Brexit make up the majority of the electorate. The contest will, I fear, see millions of lifelong Labour voters hold their noses and opt for Johnson because they feel betrayed and think Corbyn incompetent.

If all this sounds too pessimistic you can seek more comforting conclusions elsewhere. But that would be the wrong thing to do. The great Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci never flinched from facing unpalatable truths head on. His ‘pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will’ philosophy was imbedded in the need to face the facts as he saw them, in his case those posed by Mussolini’s fascism in the 1930s. Gramsci’s trademark prescription is necessary today as the prospect of another Tory Government undermines the likelihood of another legally binding referendum on independence. I regret that because independence offers the only chance of democratic advance and social progress north of the Border I can see any time soon.

Whilst Nicola Sturgeon was right to insist at SNP conference last month that independence will only be secured democratically, it was perhaps the only thing she has been right about these past 4 years. She was wrong for example to pretend Scotland could stay in the EU when the UK left. And wrong to argue the 2016 vote, where Scotland opted to ‘Remain’, somehow made the case for ‘yes’ on its own. It didn’t. If she had put even 1% of the effort she dedicated to peddling ludicrous myths about the EU into making the case for independence we would be much nearer the majority we need today. Furthermore, she has done nothing to advance the crucial economic case for independence. Her endorsement of the lamentable Sustainable Growth Commission, for example, has made that task more difficult because it repels the very people we need to win over i.e. the working class majority who see in independence a rejection of the neoliberal status quo not its reinforcement.

If the political picture has one positive, however, it is surely the widespread, if inchoate, popular resistance to global warming. As one participant in our recent Scottish Socialist Voice Forum on climate change in Edinburgh declared: ‘Whatever else may be said about ‘Extinction Rebellion’ and their political confusion they have certainly made protest fashionable again’.

And yet ‘protest’ will not be enough. I was struck by a comment made by an analyst at UBS in the Financial Times recently who held that attempting to restrict global warming to 2 degrees above pre-industrial levels is already a lost cause. The best we can hope for, he insisted, is to manage a 4 degree rise with all that entails. Since low lying countries such as Bangladesh may be under water by 2050, mankind faces stark, existential challenges; how to save large portions of humanity from drowning, disease and premature death when the predominant political ideology rejects universal access to limited resources in favour of rewarding wealthy elites still further. As the dominant political philosophy today rejects the idea of saving the lives of billions, it is surely the system itself that must be replaced.

Again, readers looking for easy solutions must find them elsewhere! The labour movement in Scotland and beyond faces profound challenges. Brexit is going to happen. Boris Johnson looks set to win a sizeable Parliamentary majority, strengthening both the Tories and global capitalism, preventing another independence referendum and those democratic solutions to the dangers posed by global warming. Socialist solutions, including a Green New Deal and a break with the private ownership of capital, have never been more necessary nor face a more daunting challenge.

Colin Fox is the national spokesperson of the Scottish Socialist Party. He sat on the YES Scotland Advisory Board 2012-14 and was SSP MSP for The Lothians 2003-2007
Our politics is in crisis. It is utterly broken. The farce that is Westminster cannot be taken seriously. That the British Prime Minister faces no consequences despite having been found by the highest court in the land to have misled the head of state and lied to the people, after having broken electoral law in a referendum campaign shows just how broken our politics is. We, the people, deserve better. So much better.

Scotland faces a constitutional and political crisis: Brexit, Scotland’s vote to ‘remain’, the call for an independence referendum, the democratic deficit, the erosion of local democracy, and more. Scotland also faces a climate crisis: an economy over-reliant on an industry that will destroy the planet. And Scotland faces a social justice crisis: increasing inequality, increasing employment precarity, increasingly unmet demands for health and social care provision. These crises have, at their heart, one single cause: an economic system designed to alienate, disenfranchise and disempower. And that economic system can only be dismantled if we, as a society - a country - come together and demand a different kind of democracy.

That neoliberalism has such a stranglehold on our lives is both a cause and a consequence of a broken democracy. There is a serious dialectic at play between democracy and its enemies. Those who oppose democracy tend toward one of two positions. First, the technocratic position, which sees people as the problem: the general public do not know what’s good for them and will make the wrong decisions. Therefore, those decisions should be taken by elites in positions of power and allowed to get on with it. Second, the conflation of democracy with the market: the idea that government and state interference with the market is wrong, and deregulation and the removal of collective power and endeavour is the answer.

Our response to these enemies of democracy must be to find ways to deepen and broaden our democracy and democratic practice. Our current democratic architecture has not changed much in the last century: we might have more devolution and less local government, but we still run things by electing people once every 4-5 years and expecting them to get on with it. That is not - has never been - good enough.

My vision for Scotland’s future is a country that is fairer and more equal, a country in which citizens are well educated and well supported to be active citizens: a country where all voices are heard, and all voices matter. To create such a country, we need to revolutionise our democracy, enriching it, transforming it, creating new structures, processes and cultures that enable, encourage and support active citizenship.

We must find ways to increase engagement in issues of national (and international) importance. The Republic of Ireland, who used to do referendums badly, managed to transform their democratic processes by using citizens’ assemblies to navigate the stormy waters of equal marriage and abortion. These assemblies brought together individuals from a cross-section of society - balanced by gender, age, location and social class - chosen at random like a jury, and led them through a well-facilitated process that allowed them to understand the details of the issue, and to deliver a recommendation to be put through the legislative process or to a referendum where a constitutional change was needed. Such richer engagement with the issue gives much more faith to the public that the proposed way forward is not a political stitch-up, and resulted in extremely successful votes to legalise equal marriage and abortion.

And I say successful not just because I agree with the outcomes, but because those outcomes have not been subject to the same rancour and disagreement that referendums done badly often are: they have losers’ consent. I want these sorts of deliberative processes at the heart of Scottish democracy, with a (permanent) citizens’ assembly acting like a second chamber to the Parliament. Such an approach could be very usefully deployed on questions like: identifying taxes that move with the shifts in retail on the high street to retail online, dealing with air pollution, questions of social care, and replacing much of the prison system.

We must also democratis our everyday lives and workplaces. Finding ways to make democracy more real for citizens in their schools, colleges, workplaces and communities will normalise decision-making. We need to give workers the power to buy their workplaces, just as crofters have the power to buy their crofting estates. We should ensure that such powers are delivered to every community in Scotland. We must embed participatory processes in our budget-setting arrangements, going far beyond the participatory budgeting projects we see at the moment. Mainstreaming such approaches for deciding major elements of public spending will ensure we have nationwide understanding of the need for increased funding for public services as well as securing the need to protect minorities. And, we can support our children to become natural decision-makers by encouraging collaboration and co-production of curriculums at schools, colleges and universities. This is all about making it utterly normal and expected for people to have a say about every aspect of their lives.

In addition to changing structures and processes to redistribute power, we must catalyse a culture change too. At the heart of many of the technocratic or neo-liberal arguments is an assumption that disagreement is bad, that politics is necessarily unpleasant, and that we should avoid discussion and disagreement wherever possible. Rather, we need to ensure that debate and discussion are nurtured, and that people understand how to disagree with each other, argue with each other, and so learn from each other. And, we need to transform our understanding of negotiation and concessions, so that we appreciate how decisions can be made collectively.

In order to do all of this, we need to act in cooperative ways: individual action will not succeed. We must build and sustain social movements of radical democracy to confront and transform the constraining structures and systems that neo-liberalism has imposed on us. Social movements are the agents of change in this era of political brokenness and farce.

Maggie Chapman is the rector at the University of Aberdeen and a leading Scottish Green Party activist
Realigning the left
Kenny MacAskill argues for a form of left cooperation and consensus as the new way forward

Hated between Labour and SNP has been visceral for generations, long predating the independence referendum. Ostensibly the constitution’s the divide but it’s also that the parties, whatever they may say, compete on the same political terrain with similar social democratic policies.

The dislike and disdain, in the main, is not shared by voters who tend to be fluid between the two parties. Just as Tory and LibDem voters are likewise the other set of Scotland’s two inter-connected political camps. This Labour-SNP antagonism has not served either well and certainly not the country. Instead, it’s been debilitating and sterile – a case of political sectarianism limiting new thinking and co-operative actions.

It has to stop as the only winners are the Tories. There’s much more that unites than divides and the price of failure to co-operate is paid by the most vulnerable, who both parties claim to have foremost in their minds. It doesn’t mean a pact or even an electoral truce. An election is coming and both will go head to head. Let the contest take place but thereafter let co-operation begin for the stakes are too high to do otherwise.

The electoral permutations will also likely facilitate or demand it. The easiest outcome for it would be the scenario of SNP support at Westminster for a Corbyn administration. Whilst it may put some Scottish Labour leadership noses out of joint it would be welcomed by many rank and file and also by both parties’ electorate. Getting this current Tory administration out is the earnest plea of both parties’ supporters.

Whilst hard for many in the leadership at the outset, it would be the basis for a political realignment, protecting the integrity of both parties and allowing for continued deviation on the final constitutional settlement. That debate on federalism or independence could continue and a resolution through a further referendum could be agreed.

An outright Labour victory seems inconceivable but an outright Tory majority on a low vote remains a distinct possibility. As in 1983, a rise in LibDem support at the expense of Labour simply sees the Tory’s returned. That’s the nightmare scenario for SNP and Labour voters, ground down by years of enforced austerity. Stopping them whether at the border or in Westminster has been the desire for both sets of supporters and it has seen voters stampede to one or other depending on who they see as best placed to defend them at that particular point in time.

But if another Tory victory comes about, then co-operation both in Westminster and Scotland becomes essential. People are entitled to no less as this will be the most right-wing administration in living memory, hell bent on rolling back the gains of social democracy enjoyed by generations.

Of course, it will require change by the parties themselves. Neither party is blameless, each have things to be both proud of or to regret. But it will not be the time for continued recriminations but for a realignment to protect Scottish working people’s interests.

Labour will require to cease being so irredentist on the constitution. Support for independence is not required but an end to unflinching and dogmatic unionism is a necessity. It has been an electoral disaster for them and will continue to be especially if a further Tory Government is returned. But there are signs that many grassroots members are less intransigent and much more open to new thinking. That has also been signalled by the London Labour leadership and will be forced upon the Scottish group if the first scenario comes to pass. Rather than being treacherous, it would be better for them to mirror cooperation that will be taking place at Westminster, irrespective of the election’s outcome.

Change has also to be mirrored in the SNP. It has been remiss in its relationship with the wider labour movement. For sure good relations have been forged with the STUC but the SNP needs to go much beyond that. Organised labour needs a much bigger role within the SNP and given more respect too. Cooperation needs to take place there as in Parliament.

For the overarching issue here is not simply the defence of our people’s interests but also the promotion of the wider social democratic cause. Either independence or federalism might well come quickly from Johnson’s abandonment of unionism. Ensuring that the benefits in the new land, however its constituted, for working people is essential.

The ruling elite in Scotland who serve Tory interests will be the same as their counterparts in every other land that’s achieved sovereignty, in whatever shape or form. They’ll shamelessly jump up to preserve their interests and proclaim undying loyalty to the new regime as they had the old.

A ‘new’ Scotland must avoid simply mirroring the old ‘North Britain’ with a tartan ribbon put around vested interests. Progress has been made in Scottish public life with gender balanced boards but it’s been horizontal not vertical in class terms. That needs to change and cooperation is again required.

A century ago, the Glasgow May Day Rally in 1919 saw Constance Markievicz as the principal speaker, joining others including the great John McLean and his namesake Neil Mclean ILP MP for Govan. She had been appointed Minister for Labour in the newly established Dail Eireann just months before. Supporters of independence and of socialism came together then and must do so again. Let a realignment on the left begin.

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’).
Time for transformation is now – we must fix our broken constitution

Lynn Henderson says that out of crisis comes opportunity 200 years on from Peterloo

You don’t have to look far to see the Westminster political system in crisis. Brexit has polarised our politics more than ever before. The current British government, with no majority and no popular mandate, seems determined to implement a damaging no-deal Brexit. The recent Queen's speech set out a raft of reforms that would create further inequality and make the poorest in society poorer.

And when faced with scrutiny and resistance from MPs, Johnson shuts down Parliament until prorogation was struck down by the courts. Even now, when faced with scrutiny over its Brexit Bill, the government threatens to go on 'strike' to prevent the work of parliament from taking place. This is not the way democracy should work, with voices silenced and the executive is free to act with few constraints.

Back in August, Politics for the Many held its ‘This is What Democracy Looks Like’ one-day conference in Manchester, bringing together trade unionists, campaigners and progressive activists to make the left-wing case for a new constitutional settlement.

Our event marked 200 years since the Peterloo Massacre in Manchester when in 1819, over 60,000 working people gathered to demand political representation and the chance for their voices to be heard and their city be represented in Parliament. Local magistrates tried to shut down the meeting, sending in cavalry to disperse the crowd in brutal attack that left 18 people dead and over 600 injured.

Peterloo is recognised as a key moment in the history of the reform movement, one that changed public opinion, shifted support towards the suffrage movement and helped an increasingly politisiced working class find their voice.

One of Peterloo’s legacies is that democracy is never settled. It will always be challenged and those in control will always attempt to seize more power for themselves. And so, the last few months have seen Johnson’s government move to do just that so that it is clear our constitution is in desperate need of radical reform.

We need to fight with the same passion today for a better democracy. This is not merely an ‘English’ problem or one that we Scots can attribute to ‘Down South’. Whatever our position on Scotland’s future, progressive Scots must be at the forefront of the fight for democracy across these islands. Of course, since Scottish devolution in 1999, the creaking constitution of the UK’s political system has barely changed.

The Brexit deadlock shows just how broken that political system is. Parties refuse to work together, voters are left on the side-lines and the view of Scotland is all but ignored. Now more than ever the need for comprehensive reform of Britain’s centralised Westminster system is being seriously discussed and debated across the left.

The biggest affront to democratic accountability remains the House of Lords. Packed to the rafters with political appointees and still-existing hereditary peers, it is more akin to a private members’ club than a legislative chamber. Meanwhile, Westminster’s winner-takes all electoral system continues to shut out the voices people as votes pile up in safe seats leaving millions of people unrepresented. And, the Tories plan to exclude even more people through their US-style voter suppression plans.

Throughout our history, it has been down to ordinary working people to fight for democratic rights. It is not enough to await Scottish independence as the means to a radical socialist future. Scotland is still split 50-50 on the issue.

We need a more equal, fairer politics now. And there is work to be done in the system that we are in, starting with a democratically elected second chamber where Scotland, alongside the other nations and regions are represented and the voices of their people are heard - a chamber elected by PR like the one used here in Scotland where everyone is represented and no votes are wasted.

In the past few months we’ve seen progress. Labour committed to an overhaul of the archaic house of Lords and, speaking at our conference Jon Trickett, Shadow Minister for the Cabinet Office, called for a democratic revolution and demanded that Labour go deeper and be bolder on reform. At Labour’s recent conference and The World Transformed festival there was a strong feeling that things needed to change and democratic reform should be at the centre of a radical socialist programme.

Reform should not be seen as a luxury or afterthought. It is part and parcel of the radical and transformative agenda we need to improve people’s lives. The movement for political equality is central to the movement for economic equality. It is the rotten system that leaves millions voiceless and excluded from politics that has put us where we are today. Together we, as trade unionists, activists and campaigners can lead the fight for a better democracy.

We find ourselves in a political crisis and pivotal moment in our history. We’re at a fork in the road: between democracy or Estonian despotism. This crisis can be the start of a new movement democracy – and the protests we’ve seen over prorogation should give us hope. Let’s step it up: our labour movement should commit to giving working people the voice they’ve for so long felt they haven’t had.

If you agree, join us: politicsfortheman.co.uk and join Politics for the Many on Facebook: www.facebook.com/groups/TradeUnionistsforPoliticalReform, pass a motion supporting Politics for the Many in your union branch or CLP, write a letter to your paper or union magazine backing an overhaul or get in touch: politicsfortheman@gmail.com

Lynn Henderson is the chair of ‘Politics for the Many’ and a national officer of the PCS union.
Taking back the power: forcing the EU’s hand

Though a little late in the day, Gregor Gall suggests a way out of the ‘leave’/’remain’ stasis for the left

For anyone on the left to have urged a vote for ‘leave’ in 2016 was a strategic mistake. For anyone on the left to support ‘leave’ now is another strategic mistake. Why? Simply because with the retreat of the radical left – despite the rise of Corbynism – and the ascendency of the populist hard right, it was always going to be the case that the latter was going to determine the nature of any Brexit – whether ‘hard’, ‘soft’ or ‘no deal’. And, whatever type of Brexit we’ll get under the Tories – this being the most likely political scenario, it will be one for further deregulation and even more neo-liberalism. You only have to see that with the issue of the protection of workers’ rights and the environment having been moved from the legal text of the withdrawal agreement and being put instead into the political declaration (which has no legal force).

So, the point here is that the timing for leaving the EU is all wrong given the balance of political forces. Does that mean that leaving the EU is wrong per se? Does all that mean that the EU is progressive and something the left should defend? The simple answer to these questions is ‘no’. The EU has in most cases been a powerful engine for neo-liberalism and turbo-charged capitalism more generally. Does that mean that ‘remain’ must become the default option now and into the future? Well, not exactly because that would mean to accept another ‘devil’ – ‘better the devil you know’ is not a great option. There is very little in the way of a positive case for the EU. State intervention is not altogether ruled out within the EU as the existence of transport being under public ownership in a number of countries on the continent shows. But the scope for an active, progressive state is highly limited within the EU.

So, what does that mean for a possible new left strategy? Noting that the likes of John McDonnell seem to be moving towards ‘remain’, it might mean suggesting ‘remain and rebel’ but not as some empty slogan which actually really means meekly accepting our fate within the present EU. It might not even mean trying to reform the EU from within as some on the left hold out as a more palatable option. Rather, what it means is that the left should consider the strategy of building the political forces to use the state to tame capitalism. That would mean doing things that the EU would mean we would not block like bringing considerable parts of the economy under public ownership and restricting the right of capital to move freely. Only at the point of having built mass support for defying the EU would the issue of a left Brexit become realistic and credible.

Specifically, it would mean not choosing to leave the EU but essentially being expelled by the EU for breaking its own rules on regulating capitalism. The left might then be in a position to determine the nature of a Brexit because the left could then pose the issue like this – we want to use the state to tame capitalism and the EU does not and will not allow us to do that within the EU. To the public, the left would then say: ‘If you support what we are doing, you must show this support by taking part in mass mobilisations to say we will defy the EU diktats and we will not back down’. If the EU chooses to expel Britain, then so be it. In doing so, the political forces to determine a left Brexit will have been secured, this being the opposite to the Brexit we currently face. The left would also have to create a series of equitable economic and trading relationships reminiscent of what the likes of Venezuela and Bolivia have tried to do in Latin America in order that Britain did not become isolated and weakened by taking this path of resistance on its own. Hopefully such a revolt in Britain would also stimulate a revolt amongst the working classes of other EU countries, leading to the destruction of the EU. This is the real ‘third way’ of our present times. It means we would not be bystanders on Brexit.

This argument is quite different from the ‘remain and rebel’ of the ‘Labour for a Socialist Europe’ and ‘Another Europe Is Possible’ campaigns because this argument does not believe as they do that the EU can be transformed into a socialist federation of countries like a United States of Europe. The EU needs to be destroyed and abolished because it is irrefutable in terms of the scale of economic and social change that is necessary and being sought.

Gregor Gall is a visiting professor at the University of Leeds and an affiliate research associate at the University of Glasgow.
Striking out for our future against a dead planet

Dylan Hamilton reflects on what was achieved in the September climate action

On Friday 20 September, the week of climate action started with a global strike for climate. Around the world, people took to the streets to protest against the destruction of our climate with an incredible total of 7.5m. There was a strike on every single continent, including Antarctica, with school strikers calling for adults to join with them for the first time. In Scotland, we had a total of 40,000 strikers which is equivalent to 1 out of 125 people.

Edinburgh had a large march with over 20,000, as did Glasgow with 15,000. We even had strikes as far north as Lerwick and on Iona, as well as Ullapool and Elgin. What followed this was a jam-packed week of events and demonstrations.

Throughout the week we had events such as the ‘Day of Death,’ where Scottish Youth Climate Strike (SYCS) organised die-ins, a ‘Day of Discussion’ in which we created a document called the Scottish People's Climate Action Declaration, which was presented to some MSPs later in the week on the ‘Do What’s Necessary’ day, and received support from every party. We had a ‘Day of Education,’ as one of our demands is to teach about the severity of the climate crisis in our schools. Since we’ve had lots of support from EIS, the largest teaching union, this day was a massive success. It was an incredible week, and at the end we had 20 pages of sign-ups!

After the week, it has been a mix of down-time and figuring out what SYCS will do next. Internationally, discussions started about the date of the next global climate strike which has now been decided as Friday 29 November.

Despite the massive protests, we know we can’t go away as the government still is not doing enough. On the 25 September, there was a vote in the Scottish Parliament on the climate bill. It increased the target from reducing emissions by 70% by 2030 to 75%, which is a large step in the right direction. However, it needs to be more as this does not guarantee a safe world for the next generations to grow up in. The Scottish Government still says it is doing enough, yet it is spending £6bn on upgrading two roads to dual carriageways, with a measly £80m for public transport and cycling. So, it is very clear to us that we have to keep up the pressure.

Our organisation skills have improved massively since the first global climate strike on 15 March 2019: we have strong outreach plans and large followings on social medias, just to name a few. We’ve expanded from only having a few strike locations to multiple ones in every nook and cranny of Scotland. We’ve also grown relationships with media, which has helped spread awareness of the climate crisis and encouraged more people to come out and protest with us. The media attention we received was insane, and we were on the BBC multiple times throughout the day and we’re still finding articles and television segments we didn’t know happened.

So, what’s next? There’s been a lot happening and coming up in the climate movement at the moment. The Amazon rainforest is still on fire, and we’ve seen hurricanes breaking records yet again. Extinction Rebellion (XR) spent two weeks in London, as well as across the world, fighting for the future through civil disobedience. While we do not endorse all the actions taken by XR, it has been extremely helpful in aiding our movement with resources and have gotten lots of people talking. XR was met with a horrendous police response - with people being arrested simply travelling in taxis and illegal ID checks being performed. This response reminds me of a terrifying statistic for climate activists - that three of us are killed every single week, particularly indigenous activists. We constantly call for climate justice, but things only seem to be worsening, so we’ll fight even harder. We have our next global strike date tying in with Black Friday, as we know that consumerism has large effects on our planet. This strike will be in solidarity with COP25 in Chile, a United Nations summit on climate change which will be hosted in Santiago de Chile the week after. This event is a large deal, especially since Glasgow will be hosting it next year and so we are already beginning organisation for this. The school strikers are determined, and we most certainly will not be going away for a very long time.

Dylan Hamilton is fifteen years old and active in Scottish Youth Climate Strike (SYCS) – see https://www.sycs.org.uk/
Combining climate justice and social justice

Pete Cannell reports on the ScotE3 campaign to make climate action and social justice go hand-in-hand within the ‘just transition’

On 11 October 2015, I was one among several thousand linking arms across the Forth Road Bridge. This action organised by ‘Hands Over Our Forth’ (HOOF) was meant to be the latest stage in a mass campaign to stop underground coal gasification (UCG) by burning the coal seams under the Forth. However, just before the event the Scottish Government announced that UCG would not go ahead. So, the demo became a celebration. It was an assembly like no other environmental protest I’ve ever been on. Diverse, militant and embedded in the working class communities of Fife and the Lothians. When we formed my local group in Portobello, ‘Our Forth Against Unconventional Gas’, no one knew about UCG, but a whole host of local people, including ex-miners (appalled at the stupidity of setting fire to coal seams) quickly spread the word and through imaginative campaigning and direct action we won.

A great deal has happened in the four years since HOOF, much of it in the last year; XR has injected urgency into climate campaigning and the school student strikes have been inspirational, both putting the idea of collective action back on the agenda. Yet all of this has been against the backdrop of accelerating rates of carbon emissions and new evidence of the severity of the climate crisis.

ScotE3 (Employment, Energy and Environment) was initiated by a small group of rank-and-file union activists (mainly working in construction and defence) and activists like myself keen to find a way of taking climate action into workplaces and working class communities. We were inspired by the Million Climate Jobs programme for a transition to a sustainable economy and by the struggles for just transition taking place in working class and indigenous communities in the US and elsewhere.

After working together on a submission to the Scottish Government’s energy consultation, we began by producing briefing documents that aimed to frame the politics and practice of transition in ways that related to trade unionists. The lived experience of our class is that change usually means paying the price for the problems of the rich and powerful. The havoc wreaked by pit closures and the end of coal still scars communities across Scotland. The message we want to get across is that a ‘just transition’, based on the million climate jobs strategy, must mean more employment not less, better transport, more comfortable homes and a future for our children and grandchildren.

It’s a big step forward that issues of social justice have become prominent in the climate movement and reference to ‘just transition’ is now routine in the climate movement. The challenge, however, is to articulate the ideas implicit in ‘just transition’ in ways that can engage working class people who are rightly cynical about the promises of politicians and expect that they will be asked to pay the price for transition. ‘Just transition’ is usually framed in terms of ensuring that the lives and livelihoods of those currently dependent on work in the hydrocarbon sector are protected as we transition to zero carbon. This is absolutely correct but in our view the definition needs to go broader and deeper. The skills and knowledge of those currently working in the oil and gas and defence sector are critical to the rapid transition that is required. The new climate jobs need to be on decent terms and conditions – not the short-term agency contracts that are more and more prevalent in these sectors. An effective transition needs to work for the bulk of the population and not just for the rich and powerful. So, it needs to tackle the gross inequality that has been a feature of the last few decades of neoliberalism. Moreover, it also needs to encompass free movement given that the impact of climate change is, and will be, experienced most rapidly and in its most extreme form in the global south.

In November 2018, we held our first conference at which the participants spent the day working on a practical manifesto for ‘just transition’. A diverse set of participants found common cause about what needs to be done. The harder question, which we return to at this year conference, is how to make ‘just transition’ actually real. Not just because a ‘just transition’ is the right thing to do; it’s the only way to build the kind of mass campaign that’s needed. Reliance on market solutions has led to a world teetering on the edge of catastrophe. The alternative requires us to take the spirit of rebellion into every aspect of our lives, health, transport, housing and to demand action and to not take no for an answer. Find out more about ScotE3 and our 16 November 2019 conference in Edinburgh at our website (see below).

Pete Cannell is a founding member of Scot.E3, a part-time teacher, member of the UCU and activist in rs21. The website of ScotE3 is https://scote3.wordpress.com/, its Twitter is @ scot_e3 and facebook is https://www.facebook.com/e3.scot/
Jimmy Reid − remembering a political giant

Academics Bill Knox and Alan McKinlay published their biography of Jimmy Reid called Jimmy Reid: A Clyde-built man (Liverpool University Press, 2019).

It is the result of many year’s painstaking original work. On the occasion of its publication, Scottish Left Review interviewed both of the authors to ask them about why they choose to study Reid, what they found and what conclusions they drew.

Nearly 50 years after the high point of his political influence, that being the successful UCS work-in he helped lead, what is Jimmy Reid’s overall political significance?

His overall political significance is the continuing need to make well paid and meaningful work a requirement of the state and society and not just the responsibility of the individual. In a period of rising inequality, of low wages, of food banks, Jimmy’s fight against poverty is something that should inspire the current generation to emulate him and make poverty history. Because Jimmy not only experienced poverty first hand but he fought all his life to end it.

What made you want to study him?

There are personal and political reasons. Personally, as young men, we were inspired by the audacity of the UCS work-in and those that led it − not just Reid but also Jimmy Airlie. The defiance showed by workers against the supposedly unanswerable forces of the market gave a lead to many in the same position.

Politically, it was the ability of the UCS stewards to turn what was a local dispute into a national one, and given the support from abroad, an international one as well. The progressive, outward looking perspective of Reid and his fellow stewards inspired us and the Scottish nation. The mobilisation of a cross-section of society, including Tories, was at once a lesson in building alliances, and a full-frontal attack on market forces, making a social or moral case that put community at the heart of economic planning. From another point. There was Jimmy’s presence as a player in all the main industrial and political struggles of the post Second World War decades. His life illuminates our understanding of forms of political and social change by showing how they were interpreted and negotiated by an individual.

What did you unearth about him that is not known or well known about him?

Jimmy started his working life not in a shipyard or engineering works but in a stockbroker’s office in Glasgow. He was the youngest transfer clerk in the Glasgow Stock Exchange. Coming from a macho culture of hard men in the shipyards, it was rather surprising that Jimmy was a tremendous enthusiast for the novels of Jane Austen - chronicler of the loves and lives of the south-east squirearchy. Also, as a prominent supporter of the Scottish national football team and a man from an impoverished background, it was an eyeopener to find that one of his great sporting loves was English cricket!

Can you briefly explain the key political transitions in his life from Communist to Labour to the SNP?

To be a communist involved completely immersing one’s self in a political culture whose ties went way beyond the factory floor or the conference hall. However, after UCS and his failure to get elected to Westminster in the 1974 general election, his doubts about continuing this membership began to surface and led him to leave in 1976. This was not an easy decision as to relinquish your party card was much more than a political act: it was to become an apostate, a break with friends - it was a ‘gut- wrenching moment’. As a Labour Party member, he identified with the centre-left group attached to Tribune and became a close ally of Neil Kinnock in his struggles with the miners’ strike and Trotskyists. However, it became clear that as Labour began to take a softer approach to the distribution of income and wealth under the leadership of Blair and Brown, he began to distance himself from what became known as the ‘new’ Labour project. Indeed, he became one of its fiercest critics as his Herald columns attest to. He also attacked the control freakery of ‘new’ Labour and the ways that dissent was crushed in the party. For him, there was little difference between Blair and Thatcher. The growing disillusionment with Labour led Jimmy towards the SNP. With justification he could claim that he had always supported the demand for Home Rule for Scotland stopping short of calling for independence. The progressive left influenced such policies and the civic nationalism of the party appealed to Jimmy and in 2005 he joined them.

What do you think he would have made of Corbynism, Brexit and the rise of right-wing populism - would he have returned to Labour or kept supporting the SNP?

There are many things Jimmy would have found attractive in Corbynism. Firstly, the determination to reduce inequalities - taxing the rich to feed the poor. Secondly, the democratic procedures of the re-selection process. Finally, as a passionate supporter of green incentives, the Labour Party action on climate change would have been welcome. Jimmy had always argued that union officials, MPs and government ministers were not there for life and that they had to be open to re-selection particularly if they failed to represent their members or constituents. But what he would have opposed was the creation of a leadership cult, something which could also apply to those leading Brexit - that is, Farage and Johnson. He was like many on the left in Britain hostile to the European Economic Community (EEC) which was renamed the European Union (EU) because he saw it as a rich men’s club. Yet as a result of serving on a committee which led to the declaration of human rights in the 1970s, he would have - we think - favoured to ‘remain’. We don’t think he would have rejoined Labour as he had become convinced of the need of Scotland to go its own way as the best solution to the country’s economic and social problems.
Does Jimmy just represent a moment in past history or does he have a continuing contemporary relevance for left activists today?

If anything, Jimmy represented for most of his political life an affirmative morality in politics - there was no titles, no sir, no lord, but there was a determination to bestow the riches generated by working-class blood, sweat and tears, to all those in the community, particularly the vulnerable. If his life was a message, then it would be for morality rather economics to be the bedrock of political thinking and policy-making. He made the social case for the right to work, that community comes first, that when industries are destroyed then lives are also destroyed. The young today are concerned about inequality, about climate change and so on. In Jimmy, they would find the inspiration that battles can be won.

You end the book with a tribute to the Jimmy Reid Foundation as being the continuation of Jimmy's radical political thinking. Could you expand on that a little?

One of the criticisms that is made of the left for some time is level of sectarianism, the constant bickering and arguing over points of political dogma. The Jimmy Reid Foundation was set up not only to honour the memory of Jimmy Reid but also to campaign for radical changes in society. It exists to provide spaces for people to think and argue on a non-sectarian basis. Jimmy Reid was a mobiliser, an advocate of cross-cooperation across the political divides, and the Jimmy Reid Foundation carries on this work. As you say, the final paragraph of the biography reads:

Dr W.W.J. Knox is Honorary Senior Lecturer in Scottish History at the University of St Andrews. Professor Alan McKinlay is Professor of Human Resource Management at Newcastle University Business School.

- For those wishing to purchase the biography, please find the enclosed flyer with details of how to order with a discount. Alternatively go to https://www.liverpooluniversitypress.co.uk/books/id/51544/.
- The Jimmy Red Foundation wishes to thank UNITE Scotland for hosting a launch of the biography at its Glasgow offices on 25 October 2019 at which UNITE’s general secretary, Len McCluskey was a speaker alongside the two authors.

Extract from Aamer Anwar’s 2019 Jimmy Reid Foundation annual lecture

Jimmy Reid is often described as ‘the best MP that Scotland has never had’, but I believe that Jimmy was so much more. Sometimes it is easy to forget the scale of events which Jimmy led and took part in, especially when there was no social media. In June 1971, when the Tory Government announced that it intended to liquidate the shipyards on the Clyde, 800 shop stewards in a matter of days organised a mass rally with a stoppage called for the 24 June, 100,000 people stopped work and 50,000 marched on Glasgow Green. In July, Jimmy’s suggestion of a ‘work-in’ captured the imagination of workers world-wide. On the 18 August, 200,000 workers put down their tools in support of the UCS occupation and 80,000 marched on George Square. Jimmy gave rousing speech in which he said: ‘Today Scotland speaks. Not the Scotland of Edward Heath, Gordon Campbell, Sir Alex Douglas Home - of the lairs and their lackeys. They have never represented Scotland, the real Scotland, the Scotland of the working people. No title, no rank, no establishment honour can compare with the privilege of belonging to the Scottish working class … Edwards Heath, I tell you this. We are going to fight and we are not going to change. Either you will change or we will change the Government.’ The workers won the occupation, making history worldwide.

In 1972, in this hall, wearing the same robes as I, he gave a rectorial address which has stood the test of time. The rest of Jimmy’s life informed us, and we are all grateful to the Jimmy Reid Foundation, for ensuring his memories sustain us in the battles that lie ahead. At his funeral at Govan Old Parish Church, I remember seeing the great and the good, politicians from across the divide, the First Minister, comedians, trade unionists, sporting heroes and the Shipyard workers of Govan who lined the route as his coffin was escorted. There was a great deal said that day about Jimmy but the memory of his friend, a former shipyard welder, Billy Connolly is what stayed with me: ‘Jimmy put things simply. I remember him saying that if you look at these housing estates and high-rise flats - look at all the windows. Behind every one of these windows is somebody who might be a horse-jumping champion, a formula one racing champion, a yachtsman of great degree, but he’ll never know because he’ll never step on a yacht or formula one car – he’ll never get the chance.’ Sadly, for many young people behind those windows today, things have not changed very much.

We pay tribute to Jimmy Reid a self-taught intellectual, philosopher, trade-unionist, husband and father, who never sold his soul for high office, never seduced by the offer of a lordship, he always remained rooted in the community from which he came, never scared to tell the truth, often at great cost to himself. Jimmy warned us about alienation, the rat race and capitalism’s race to the bottom.

Aamer Anwar’s call to arms to campaign for truth and justice

Catriona Reid and Elizabeth Reid Boulter share their experience of the inspirational annual lecture

We are always excited about the annual Jimmy Reid memorial lecture. As we were not born during our Grandpa’s active life, it is always interesting to hear about him, particularly his famous rectorial address. Some years ago (2015), Nicola Sturgeon gave the lecture in Grandpa’s name in the Bute Hall of Glasgow University. We don’t remember much of the content, but we were so proud that this woman who we love as our role model was giving it. This year, it was Aamer Anwar, the Rector of Glasgow University, in the same hall as Grandpa’s was. We didn’t know what to expect. But he had us on the edge of our seats and on the edge of tears. His delivery was emotionally driven whilst still providing hard and difficult facts about our world today. He had our full attention for the entirety of his speech, which is an achievement in our book! It was so poignant for people our age and we were lucky enough to meet and talk afterwards to Aamer himself about how much we enjoyed his speech and how proud we were of him giving the lecture in honour of Granpa and what he stood for. We also talked about our sadness that so few young people were there and what we could do for the Reid Foundation to help engage our friends and peers.

One of the things we talked to Aamer about was his description at the beginning of his lecture about the mass demonstrations for the UCS work-in that took place in the 1970s. He said that sometimes it is easy to forget the scale of events which Jimmy led and took part in. Especially when there was no social media around at the time.

Aamer said that in June 1971 when the Tory Government announced that it intended to liquidate the shipyards on the Clyde, 800 shop stewards in a matter of days organized a mass rally with a union stoppage called for the 24 June: 100,000 people stopped work and 50,000 marched on Glasgow Green. In July, he said Jimmy’s suggestion of a ‘work-in’ captured the imagination of workers world-wide. On the 18 August 200,000 workers put down their tools in support of the UCS occupation and 80,000 marched on George Square. We didn’t know that and were amazed about how huge demonstrations were achieved prior to social media. How did they do that? Our Grandpa was indeed a motivational and inspirational man. We can only think there must have been a lot of use of ‘snail’ mail, leaflets being handed out and landline phonecalls made!

Large scale mobilisations are making a comeback today through the likes of youth for action against climate change as well as by all ages against Brexit and for Scottish independence. That is a good thing. It would be good if we also led the way to challenge poverty, inequality and racism. We were so impressed with the work Aamer does to fight against racism, his work for justice for young people who have died or committed suicide in our terrible prisons, and his fight for the Catalans against the Spanish government. Young people should have the historical knowledge about forms of protesting (particularly the UCS work in) to help inspire them to continue leading the way for change. Our Grandpa was only in his thirties when he led the UCS with the other men.

We would like to help make the Reid Foundation more relevant to the youth of today by discussing the issues happening today that are relevant to us. Aamer showed the way by using the appropriate language that we understood and his passion with which he spoke to us. Both of these things made what he said relatable to us and made the ideas easier to understand.

The form of communication that appeals to young people today, Facebook and Instagram would be ideal ways to spread Grandpa’s and Aamer’s messages of passion and anger, but also of hope. Young people could write articles themselves as we are doing now, daunting as that can feel. We’re not sure what a think tank actually does, but we’d like very much to be actively involved following Aamer’s speech. Hopefully that would encourage other young people to participate. Thank you Aamer Anwar and the Reid Foundation. We were so proud. Unity across the generations creates strength!

Catriona Reid and Elizabeth Reid Boulter are the granddaughters of Jimmy Reid, being in their late teens and early twenties and engaged in further and higher education.
Women put the issues on our agenda that matter to workers and families. We all benefit from greater equality at work – tackling gender and race pay gaps, delivering better work-life balance, or addressing mental health at work. The STUC Women’s Conference agenda underlined this, with its focus on child poverty, menopause, and mental health. It’s in all of our interests to have diversity amongst our union negotiators. However, as one comrade said exasperatedly to me recently of her union: ‘why is our executive full of straight white men?’

Too many hurdles still remain, in the form of traditional male dominated cultures, and the lack of time and support for women and other under-represented groups to come forward. Facility time is fundamental. The Tory Trade Union Act, with its facility time reporting requirements, aims to attack workers regardless of their gender, ethnicity or other attributes.

For women to step forward into union positions, we need facility time to be effective in the role. Unions and employers should be creative where part-timers step up to take on union duties. Facility time has to fit with variable working patterns, and, crucially, flexibility is needed so workplace meetings can be scheduled on the days when reps are around. My union has a number of part-time women in leading branch officer roles, but we face constant frustration with one employer who – in full knowledge of our rep’s working pattern - insists on holding negotiation meetings on her non-working day.

Unions need to explore new models for reps, including job-shares. UCU’s Queen Margaret University branch has female joint branch presidents who, with branch colleagues, successfully opposed compulsory redundancies this year. It’s not easy job-sharing a union rep role; there’s always a need to keep in touch, report back, and ensure consistency in the union approach, particularly in difficult disputes. But it’s not impossible, and sharing union roles enables part-time workers – predominantly women – to have an important voice in the workplace, sharing the responsibilities, so a position is less daunting or unmanageable.

It goes without saying that we need to ensure our activities and training sessions are inclusive. Union meetings over a pint are off-putting to people uncomfortable doing business this way. Embracing new technology opens up our movement to more people. Video conferencing, online surveys and webinars can bring union learning and activities to people who’ve felt excluded in the past. With more people working remotely and precariously, often the best way to organise is with new technology.

Finally, we need to shift the tenor of the debate: in workplaces, on social media and in society at large - and the voices of women are key. You don’t have to shout the loudest to get your point across, or to be effective. Kinder debate isn’t about backing down, or failing to tackle challenges. It’s about approaching issues in an inclusive, reasoned way, targeting the oppressors rather than the oppressed.

Given the divisive times we live in, the prevailing narrative has become too aggressive and bitter. You only need to see the abuse politicians and others receive online. All too often women are at the sharp end, potentially putting them off from taking on representative positions. Our role is to unite working people, to show our common humanity and equality. Women’s voices are central to doing so.

Mary Senior is the Scotland Official of the University and College Union (UCU) and Vice President of the STUC.
**Work to end domestic abuse far from finished**

*Megan Gordon says the 16 Days of Activism campaign is making progress but much remains to be done*

As we approach the period of the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence (25 November to 10 December), Scotland is in the middle of our first year of implementing a world-leading new domestic abuse law. At Scottish Women’s Aid, we exist to work for a Scotland free of domestic abuse; a future where women, children and young people enjoy all of their human rights and have equal opportunity to explore all of their ambitions and aspirations. Scotland’s ground-breaking new law on domestic abuse, which came into force on the 1 April 2019 was a significant step in the right direction.

Coercive and controlling behaviours are now criminalised meaning that the emotional and psychological abuse that women and children have been telling us for decades is the most traumatic and the hardest to recover from is now reflected as such in the law. It’s a course of conduct offence, reflecting the fact that abuse is made up of many tactics over time. This law is also the first to put children on the face of domestic abuse, which has been a long-standing issue. This law is also the first to put children on the face of domestic abuse, which has been a long-standing issue.

Violence against women is both a cause and consequence of women’s inequality and to end one we must end the other. Interventions need to be early and effective and our society must actively reject all forms of violence against women and girls. It is vital that women have the opportunity to thrive as equal citizens socially, culturally, economically and politically.

We know that women start out poorer and are less likely to have job security or own their home. They’re doing most of Scotland’s unpaid caring work, which came into force on the 1 April 2019 was a significant step in the right direction.

We will continue to call for protection and justice for women and children and we will keep stressing the need for appropriate responses to perpetrators – responses that do not minimise or excuse their behaviour, but rather hold them to account for the insidious patterns of abuse that they carry out.

We will keep pushing for equality in all spheres and working to break down the barriers that hold women and girls back.

The words and experiences of tens of thousands of Scottish women and children are echoed in those words from the aforementioned woman saying, ‘It’s just agony, agony, agony’. Scotland can and must be better than this. 16 Days is a chance to highlight the need, but the efforts must continue year-round.

Roughly 60,000 domestic abuse police calls a year are an indicator of women’s inequality. When we work on tackling both, we change Scotland for everyone.


Megan Gordon is the External Affairs Officer at Scottish Women’s Aid (https://womensaid.scot/)
Making Freedom of Information fit for the job

*The law must be revised to reflect how publicly funded services are now delivered argues Carole Ewart*

In October 2019, the UN General Assembly adopted a Resolution proclaiming 28 September as the International Day for Universal Access to Information. This high-level platform will publicise the right to seek and receive information which enables people to form an opinion which they can express freely. The Government of Liberia led the way following a campaign beginning at a historic meeting in Sofia on 28 September 2002 which also founded the FOIAnet, a global network of activists, academics and professionals pushing to get greater transparency in law, culture and practice. This network has been invaluable to activists in Scotland as we have immediate access to a vast pool of knowledge and expertise unified in the purpose of securing, extending and being ambitious about laws which enforce the public’s right to know about how they are governed and how public money is spent.

Freedom of Information (FoI) means different things to people around the world but its impact on our lives and on our democratic structures is immense – especially in terms of counterbalancing official flows of information designed to mislead, distort and lie. Ambassador Kemanyah, who delivered the presentation at the UN, emphasised how important FoI rights are as ‘the lack of information can mean the difference between life and death’. Unions, activists, community groups all recognise that information is critical to being able to make informed decisions about the safety of our workplaces and the performance of essential services such as health and social care.

The consultation also seeks to gather opinions/speculate on the consequences such as ‘Do you have any comments on whether extending FOISA to organisations providing services on behalf of the public sector is likely to impact on those organisations’ ability to provide services in this way?’ It is vital that a balanced range of views is provided so that the proposals see the statute book.

The Campaign for Freedom of Information in Scotland (CFoIS) has always argued that the right to know should follow the spend of the public pound. It is immaterial whether the service is delivered by the private sector, a voluntary organisation or a local authority as people should be able to make an enforceable request for information about the service simply because it is funded by the public purse. Many organisations will have a view and CFoIS wants to build support to extend FoISA and to ensure greater transparency and accountability in the delivery of publicly funded services.

More broadly ‘public access to information and fundamental freedoms’ is one of the specified targets in the 17 Sustainable Development Goals which are designed to change the world. For that to happen requires transparency and accountability in the public, private and voluntary sectors so it is fitting that the general right to access information covers all sectors too when public money is being spent. Of course, there is a huge discussion about whether it is a public service or a service of a public nature and no doubt these semantics will keep us busy over the coming months. However, the first hurdle is to engage with the process of consultation in Scotland, so the challenge is to respond by 22 November and make your voice count.

Carole Ewart is Convener of CFoIS – see https://www.cfoi.org.uk/scotland/ - and a member of the Scottish Left Review editorial committee. The aforementioned consultation can be found at https://www.gov.scot/publications/freedom-information-extension-coverage-consultation/
Not cracking up in Caracas

In August 2019, the SSP sent Bill Bonnar to visit the Venezuelan capital, Caracas. Here is his report

The picture of Caracas which appears in most of the media proved to be deeply misleading. This was of a city racked by political violence, crime and a government clinging to power through the brutal use of the army. What I witnessed was a city and its people going about its normal business. I saw no obvious conflicts or particularly repressive army presence. At a meeting with officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, it was explained that most of what appeared in the western media was simply propaganda put out by the right-wing opposition and the United States. Instead they invited me to travel across the city both with guides and on my own and report on what I witnessed.

My first impression was that the Bolivarian Revolution remains strong with significant levels of support. It appears a heady mixture of revolutionary socialism, Venezuelan nationalism and social Catholicism; encapsulated in the form of former leader, Hugo Chavez, whose presence is everywhere. His successor, Nicolas Maduro, is described in the West as a dictator but this is simply not true. He is the elected President of an elected government; a government which has won 23 out of the last 25 regional, national and presidential elections. He also appears to be part of a strong collective leadership.

The right-wing opposition has little or no presence within the capital; it is overwhelmingly located in the wealthy white suburbs stretching along the Caribbean coast. It struggles to influence events in Caracas because it is not in the capital. Early on a picture of the opposition emerged. Overwhelming white and middle class, it called for the ‘restoration of democracy’ although it lacked any real democratic credentials. It has never recognised any PSUV election victory, has been calling for the overthrow of the elected government since 1999, has glorified in some of the past right-wing dictatorships which ruled Venezuela and is completely in the pay of the United States. Its aim is clear - to turn the clock back to the point immediately before the Bolivarian Revolution when it treated the country as its own personal property and when the government was composed of people exactly like it.

Support for the government remains strong. You see it in the numbers of people wearing PSUV emblems, in the political activity in the city and in the large numbers of Venezuelan flags been flown; a strident symbol of Venezuelan resistance closely associated with the government. I saw no evidence of any kind of widespread resistance to the government in the city; in stark contrast to the kinds of stories regularly told in the western media. The army, in the form of the National Guard, has a strong presence and is strongly linked to the PSUV. All the military commanders appear to be leading political figures in their own right and project a very definite image as defenders of Venezuelan sovereignty and the Bolivarian Revolution. It is interesting to watch a pro-government mass rally on television; addressed by a leading army general who uses words like socialism, imperialism and solidarity.

One obvious example of government support was the National Petition against American Aggression; NO MAS TRUMP. Launched on the first day I arrived, I proudly signed it on behalf of the Scottish Socialist Party. In the main squares and streets large numbers of stalls had been set up for people to sign, queues quickly gathering and within a week it had totalled 7m signatures and counting.

Any visitor to Caracas will be immediately struck by the extent of the current economic crisis. It is obvious from the crumbling infrastructure, the half empty shops and the queues outside banks. While the origins of this crisis are in the collapse of world oil prices and before that the international banking crisis, what is driving it now are draconian American sanctions and domestic economic sabotage and speculation from the country’s still predominant private sector. There is a war being waged against the Venezuelan people. It is not a war fought by guns and invading foreign troops. It’s an economic war and it remains the principle weapon of the opposition and their American backers. The aim is to make the Venezuelan people so desperate that they will support any kind of change just to get back to some normality. Students of Latin American history will instantly recognise a strategy of de-stabilisation. It was applied to Chile in the seventies and Nicaragua in the eighties and is being applied to Venezuela today.

Yet the impression I had was the government was riding out the economic storm. It was beginning to bring the currency under control, deal with hyper-inflation and through increasing links with China and Russia was significantly undermining the sanctions. It is a government which appears strong, resolute and confident about the future. With the opposition apparently in complete disarray and the American Government scratching its head with what to do next, the Venezuelan Government scratching its head with what to do next, the Venezuelan Government remains firmly in control and is setting the agenda.

What struck me more than anything else was the way the Venezuelan Government frame its struggle in terms of national self-determination and sovereignty. Venezuela first emerged through a campaign against Spanish colonialism and for independence and in modern times against US aggression. From one small country fighting to achieve its own sovereignty to one fighting to defend its existing sovereignty, it is a struggle we in Scotland should be proud to identify with.

Bill Bonnar is the International Secretary of the Scottish Socialist Party and a member of the Scottish Left Review editorial committee.
Solidarity with the peoples of North East Syria

Sarah Glynn explains the roots of the current crisis and suggests a way out of it

A hundred years ago, the imperial powers reneged on their promises and left the Kurds at the mercy of states that have attacked Kurdish culture, and threatened Kurdish existence. Instead of controlling their own lives, the Kurds found their lands divided up between Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria - and in each of these places they have faced discrimination and persecution. The world has learnt nothing from history.

After 100 years of persecution and struggle, the power vacuum at the beginning of the Syrian civil war provided an opportunity for the Kurds there to begin to take control of their own lives. By this time, the Kurdish freedom movement led by Abdullah Ocalan had moved on from Marxist-Leninist independence struggle to propagate a vision of non-state autonomy. This new alternative to capitalism is based on a radical grassroots democracy that is feminist, ecological and multicultural. The Kurds attempted to implement these ideas in the predominantly Kurdish areas of South-East Turkey, but were brutally crushed by the Turkish army. In their Democratic Autonomous Area of North East Syria, they could make them a reality. The Kurdish freedom struggle became a struggle for the freedom of everyone in the region, and it pervaded every area of life, as people learnt to take control, together, of the running of their neighbourhoods.

The Kurds have a saying, Berxwedan Jiyan, meaning resistance is Life. This resistance is not just the negative resistance of the struggle against repression; it is also the positive struggle for a better society. Its ability to give life meaning is evident in the pleasure with which women and men have committed themselves to the challenge of running their communities.

The autonomous area had been established less than two years when they came under attack from the self-declared ‘Islamic State’. Kurds fought back in defence of their homes and their existence, and their committed, disciplined, resistance turned the tide against ISIS. What ultimately proved crucial to their success was the US decision to provide air support. The Kurds knew that the US was only acting in their own interests, but for now, US and Kurdish interests coincided. Without US help, the Kurds faced death, or worse.

Kurds and their allies, backed by US air power, continued the fight beyond the predominantly Kurdish regions to liberate one third of the Syrian land area from ISIS. In each place they liberated, they helped establish groups that would create the framework for grassroots democracy, and they encouraged the involvement of women and of people from all ethnic groups. Their formidable Syrian Defence Forces (SDF) undertook the fighting on the ground, at the loss of 11,000 comrades; but they have no air-force and had to rely on US air cover.

When the SDF liberated the last part of Syria controlled by ISIS, we knew, even as we celebrated, that the struggle was far from over. The very fact of that victory opened new dangers, with the Kurds perceived to have fulfilled their purpose — and, clearly, world powers had no interest in helping preserve an evolving alternative to capitalism. A resurgent President Assad, backed by his Russian masters, wanted control over the whole country - and then there was Turkey.

The Turkish Republic has ethnic nationalism at its foundations. The words of its first prime minister, written in 1925, still define official attitudes: ‘We must Turkify the inhabitants of our land at any price and we will annihilate those who oppose the Turks or ‘le Turquism’.’ Rules banning Kurdish language and culture aimed to eliminate the identity of the large Kurdish minority. At the same time, Kurdish areas were deprived of investment, in what has been described as a form of internal colonialism.

As a doubly oppressed group, Kurds were active in the Turkish left movements of the 1960s and 1970s, but they found that many of their comrades were blinded by an inflexible economism that prevented them seeing the racism of the society in which they had all been raised, and the importance of cultural oppression. So, Ocalan, and a small group of friends, established the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK).

Turkish state control has been quick to suppress the many attempts by Kurdish activists to pursue their cause through political routes, and the PKK took the path of guerrilla struggle. The response by the state has been brutal, leading to the death of around 40,000 people. Most were Kurds killed by government forces – a fact that generally gets omitted. Ocalan himself has spent the last 20 years in a Turkish prison.

Ocalan’s societal vision has reached way beyond the PKK. It is the inspiration for the Democratic Autonomous Authority in Syria, and for the pro-Kurdish, leftist People’s Democratic Party (HDP) in Turkey, whose activists and elected members face constant harassment, arrests and imprisonment. It has supporters among the Kurds of Iran, and in the Qandil mountains of Iraqi Kurdistan. But Kurds, like any other group, don’t all share the same politics, and the Kurdish Regional Government in Iraq is feudal, corrupt, and neo-liberal in its economics.

At the same time as imagining a new society, the imprisoned Kurdish leader has been persistent in the pursuit of a peaceful solution to the ‘Kurdish Question’ that would allow Kurds to live in Turkey in dignity. At time, hopes have been raised, but former Prime Minister, and now President, Erdoğan seems to have decided his political ambitions were better served by taking a hard line. The cause of peace has not been helped by the US and Europe siding with Turkey in designating the PKK a
terrorist organisation, despite a recent Belgian court conclusion that the PKK should properly be considered ‘party to an armed conflict’. But terrorist designations are guided by realpolitik rather than the court logic.

Across the world, the decline of left opposition has allowed space for rightwing and religious groups to win support through a smattering of populist actions and efficient organisation, and Erdoğan’s Justice and Development Party (AKP) fits this pattern. Its neoliberal economic policies also ensured a welcome from world leaders, but its crony capitalism has been combined with a growing authoritarianism. A brutal crackdown on minorities, especially Kurds and critics of the government, is backed up by rigid censorship and the deliberate stoking of ethnic prejudice and religious hatred. The failed coup of 2016 provided Erdoğan with an excuse for an even more brutal clampdown. Although he put the blame for the coup on his former ally, Fethullah Gülen, this clampdown extended to all his critics and perceived enemies.

The current Turkish government is a coalition of Erdoğan’s AKP with a more consciously far-right group, but it is no longer an exaggeration to describe the whole of the Turkish government as fascist. Fascist is not a term to use lightly, but this repressive, dictatorial regime, uniting – and also dividing – the country through an aggressive ethnic nationalism fits every definition of it. As a regional power with imperial ambitions, Turkey was quick to intervene in Syria. The government is driven by expansionist dreams of a new Ottoman empire with Turkey at the centre of the Muslim world; by a visceral hatred of the Kurds, who have dared to resist assimilation; and by political pressures at home - including a weak economy, that can be pushed into the background by uniting against a common external ‘enemy’.

Turkey has been the main sponsor of Islamist groups opposed to the Syrian regime, who have been responsible for extreme brutality and repression, and there is a wealth of evidence from those on the ground proving Turkey’s active support of ISIS fighters.

Turkey has also carried out three unprovoked invasions targeted at eliminating Kurdish control, and ultimately Kurdish existence, in Northern Syria. The first ensured that the Kurds were unable to link Afrin, in the west, with the rest of the land that they controlled. The second, early last year, occupied Afrin, making over 100,000 people refugees, and turning the province into a playground for warring ‘jihadi’ gangs. Having got away with this, Erdoğan effectively announced to the UN his intention to invade the whole border area and clear out the Kurdish population. All that was preventing him launching his attack was the presence of US troops.

While Turkey is a member of NATO, it has also been flirting with Russia. The US doesn’t want to find itself fighting a NATO member, and nor does it want to drive Turkey into Russian arms. Before Trump’s announcement of troop withdrawal, it had agreed major concessions to Turkey, including making the SDF dismantle its border fortifications. What persuaded Trump to pull out is harder to say. No one deems this to be in US interests, which is why the Kurds were taken by surprise. Trump seems easily swayed by his admiration for autocrats.

As soon as the US stood back, Turkey was free to invade, which it did with all the violence the Kurds had come to expect. Air attacks from the second biggest military force in NATO have been targeted at civilians and vital infrastructure, and evidence is being collected of the use of white phosphorus. Meanwhile, Turkey is paying militants who fought with Al Qaeda and ISIS to fight as frontline troops and terrorise the population. ISIS prisoners have been able to escape and join sleeper cells that can attack at any time.

All this is possible because it suits Russia to let Turkey attack. In supporting Turkey, it is weakening NATO. Russia is also content to see Kurdish power cut back and the Kurds forced to seek help from the Assad regime. That Assad is recognised as the lesser evil, is a measure of the extreme nature of Turkish-sponsored violence. Assad’s Syria is another autocratic regime with no tolerance of dissent or free speech. It previously clamped down on Syria’s Kurdish minority, banning Kurdish schools and festivals and refusing to recognise many Kurds as citizens. Assad’s forces are of only limited help, as Russia controls the airspace and does not want to clash with Turkey.

Meanwhile, European countries are reluctant to do more than criticise. Turkey is not just a trade partner, and customer for European weaponry. It is a border guard keeping immigrants and refugees out of fortress Europe, for which Europe pays billions of Euros. The 3.6m Syrian refugees who have found an uneasy shelter in Turkey, and have added to the Turkish government’s domestic pressures, have become pawns in Turkey’s imperial game. They will be used to displace the Kurds. And any time Europe protests, Erdoğan threatens to send the refugees into Europe instead.

Horror at what is happening has led to various suggestions for external intervention. If this is primarily driven by fear of losing political influence, and if it is not prepared to stand up to Turkish aggression, then it could inflame the situation and make it even more dangerous. The UN never manages to rise beyond the interests of its constituent parts and fulfil the hopes invested in it - and they have not even included the SDF in their deliberations on Syria’s future. Yet, an internationally enforced no-fly zone and peacekeeping force are desperately needed.

As activists, we still continue to call for such peacekeeping international intervention, and for meaningful sanctions on Turkey, and a full ban on arms exports. Governments will only act if we push them. We also call for a boycott of Turkey, and especially of the Turkish tourist industry, because a weak economy is Erdogan’s Achilles heel. We show our solidarity with the people of North East Syria, and, crucially, we call on everyone to help keep alive and strengthen the vision for a better world that the Kurds and their neighbours were making a reality. This should be central to our ideas and our practice. Berxwedan Jiyanê!

Sarah Glynn is co-convenor of Scottish Solidarity with Kurdistan
Missed opportunities? Stagnant statutory powers in Scottish legislation

Jonathon Deans examines the extent of the Scottish Government’s unused powers and explains their existence

When an act of legislation passes parliament, whether at Westminster or Holyrood, it will contain a commencement provision which states when the act comes into force as law. Usually, instead of setting a date, the legislation will state something like ‘the provisions of this Act come into force on such day as the Secretary of State [or Scottish Ministers] may appoint’. This creates a situation where, even though parliament has enacted the legislation, the government has the power to significantly delay it becoming law by deferring the commencement date.

In a House of Lords (now Supreme Court of the United Kingdom) case of 1995, R v Secretary of State for the Home Department, ex parte Fire Brigades Union, it was declared that the government cannot refuse to exercise this power by stating that it will never bring a statutory provision into force. However, the government still retains significant discretion on when to commence legislation.

Much has been made of the delay regarding the powers created by the Social Security (Scotland) Act 2018 for the Scottish Government to create a devolved benefits system. Originally planned for 2021, use of these powers has now been delayed until at least 2024. Similarly, the Scotland Act 2016 conferred new tax powers to the Scottish Government. The Scottish Parliament then quickly passed the Air Departure Tax (Scotland) Act 2017, to replace Air Passenger Tax in Scotland with a new devolved tax. However, bringing this tax into force has now been delayed past 2020. Changes that were envisaged to income tax bands to create a fairer and more progressive tax code for Scotland have also failed to materialise.

It could be argued that, due to the importance of issues such as benefits and taxes, the Scottish Government could be given the benefit of the doubt. It may be better to proceed with caution rather than hastily implementing a poor system. However, other, presumably less controversial, statutory powers have stagnated as well.

The Housing (Scotland) Act 1987 created a duty for local authorities in Scotland to investigate whether a person applying for emergency accommodation had become homeless ‘intentionally’, mirroring the position in England and Wales. Examples of conduct which can be considered to result in ‘intentional homelessness’ include failure to pay rent, defaulting on a mortgage, and loss of accommodation due to spending time in custody. The result of a finding of ‘intentional homelessness’ is that the local authority does not have a legal obligation to secure that person accommodation. Section 4 of the Homelessness etc. (Scotland) Act 2003 changed this duty to investigate, making it discretionary instead of mandatory. For over 16 years, this change has not been brought into effect. It is on the statute books but legally it is a non-entity.

The same problem is apparent on less politically charged topics. The Control of Dogs (Scotland) Act 2010 gave the Scottish Government the power to create a ‘Scottish dog control database’ for the retention of data on all dog control notices throughout Scotland. For a long time, there was apparently no movement towards this. Now, the Scottish Government has announced that a consultation will be held in January 2020 on whether to establish such a database.

A similar situation has arisen with Part 5 of the Land Reform (Scotland) 2016, which laid down a process for communities to seek to acquire rights to buy land. On 26 June 2019, the Scottish Government announced a consultation on regulations to bring Part 5 into force. This has created the absurd situation where the Government is consulting on regulations to bring into force statutory provisions which it passed three years previously. Ordinarily, a government would consult on plans it envisages legislating on, not on whether to bring into force existing legislation. If the Scottish Government did not intend to use these land reform or dog control powers without carrying out consultations first, then it arguably should not have conferred them until after holding the consultations.

The Scottish Government’s Programme for Government for 2018-2019 includes many ambitious and laudable ideas such as a Scottish National Investment Bank and a bill to extend the electoral franchise to all citizens who are legally resident in Scotland. It is intended for the Scottish National Investment Bank to be operational by 2020. However, it was also intended for one million acres of Scottish Land to be community owned by 2020. Currently, only around 600,000 acres are in community ownership as we near the end of 2019. The delay in implementing key community right to buy powers has likely contributed to this shortfall.

It may appear to some that the Scottish Government’s pattern is to announce new legislative powers, celebrate the new powers it has awarded itself, and then fail to use them. Some critics on the left have argued that the Scottish Government ‘talks left and walks right’ and that the reality is that the Scottish Government appeals to left-wing and working class voters with its rhetoric but ultimately is still beholden to corporate interests and powerful Scottish landowners. This is a predictable left-wing criticism for any government and may be true to an extent. There are, however, two more generous interpretations.

The Scottish Nationalist Party is often described as centre-left in ideology but it is more accurately described as a ‘big tent’ party, which seeks to attract voters from across the majority of the political spectrum. The party’s rhetoric may be driven leftwards to appeal to working
A charitable comparison would be to the Indian National Congress, which united Indians of varying class, caste, religion, and ideology, in its opposition to the British Empire’s rule of India. It has been noted that the backgrounds of SNP MPs range from investment bankers and oil executives to trade unionists and socialists. The issue may not be that the Scottish Government is embracing populism by announcing policies that it has no intention of implementing. The issue is that the elected members of the Scottish Nationalist Party all agree that they want Scotland to have these new powers, but once these powers are granted, they disagree on how they should be used, leading to a political quagmire. This would explain the delay in implementing fairer tax bands and a devolved welfare system. This would also explain why consultations need to be held in order to implement statutory provisions passed years earlier.

Another factor is the Scottish Nationalist’s Party lack of a serious opposition in Holyrood. The SNP has been in office in the Scottish Government for 12 years so far and currently holds twice as many seats in the Scottish Parliament as the next biggest party, the Scottish Conservative Party. It seems likely that the Scottish Nationalist Party will be able to retain, at minimum, a minority government for the foreseeable future. Furthermore, there are two factors which make it very difficult for other parties to ‘convert’ supporters of the Scottish Nationalist Party. Many of their supporters are intensely passionate about Scottish independence and would not vote or support any party which does not also hold that aim, regardless of how they feel about the particular policies of that party. Parallels can be drawn with the Brexit Party and other groups of ‘single issue voters’ such as gun rights activists in the United States of America. Secondly, the unique constitutional arrangements that have created Scotland’s devolved legislature mean that the Scottish Government is mostly shielded from usual levels of discontent and criticism of the status quo. In most countries, general unhappiness or a poor economy lead to the government being voted out in favour of their main competitor, with the democratic process holding the government to account for its actions in office. In Scotland, the Scottish Government can shift much antimony onto the government in Westminster, by claiming that their powers to address the pressing issues of the time are not sufficient. This also has the added effect of further strengthening their case for Scottish independence.

This lack of an opposition means that they do not have to fight hard for votes to ensure re-election, which can lead to significant levels of complacency. When the government is complacent, there is much less pressure for it to enact positive change or diligently conduct the affairs of state. This would explain the sixteen year delay in ending mandatory inquiries into intentional homelessness and the current nine year delay in setting up a Scottish dog control database.

Moving forward, the Scottish Government should commit to laying out clear plans in advance for how they intend to use the powers that they are pushing for, along with timescales for implementation. The introduction of a ‘sunset clause’ in the Planning (Scotland) Act 2019, providing that the power to create regulations expires if no regulations have been made within seven years, also provides a way for the Scottish legislature to force the hand of the Scottish executive. It is to be hoped that 2026 does not bring embarrassment to a Scottish Government that has failed to create these regulations.

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**Pushing back against Pret - making headway against malevolent management**

‘Late Night Girl’ reports on her continuing campaign for fairness and justice at Pret-A-Manger

**As I continue to recuperate and come to terms with everything that happened in my personal life and from work since my last article (‘On the frontline: crushed by corporate capitalist culture’, *Scottish Left Review*, May/June 2019), a lot has happened in Pret. I continue to write blog posts about my Pret experience, other staff continue to contact me telling me of their experiences, and on Twitter customers still complain about ongoing mislabelling of food, even after two customers have died. The first customer, 15-year old Natasha Ednan-Laperouse, died from unlabelled allergen in a baguette, and the second person, mother of five Celia Marsh, died from dairy traces in a non-dairy product.**

People are astonished and surprised to learn about Pret, as Pret has been successful in putting on a happy and ethical front for years.

I have uploaded to my website reviews of staff working at Pret that are to be found on Glassdoor, Indeed, and other social media. I have also kept an eye on Pret worldwide developments including lawsuits, in particular two over wages which Pret settled in New York, repaying 4,000 workers. This has shown that it is much harder for workers in Britain to obtain justice through the courts compared to in the US, where Pret is
constantly sued by staff, customers and other organisations on various issues.

I’m also of the opinion that I’m continually disappointed by the ongoing unprofessional conduct of Pret and its leadership. On 30 June 2019, I checked casually on Pret CEO, Clive Schlee’s Twitter feed and found a tweet by a person to Schlee wishing him well on his retirement. But no official announcement had been made on this issue. Schlee responded to the well-wisher on the same day yet did not respond to two tweets by a customer on 29 June 2019 regarding hellish work conditions in a shop, where the air conditioning was broken for a prolonged time.

On 1 July 2019 after I wrote a blog entry on Schlee’s ‘legacy’ given that on Glassdoor only 44% of staff recommended working at Pret and only 50% of staff endorsed him, I tweeted to the press about Schlee’s retirement. After my tweet, the first tweets started to flood in about his retirement after Pret’s HQ was contacted and confirmed the news. Also, Pret and then Schlee circulated the official announcements of his retirement set for September 2019. Within an hour a person tweeted a response to Pret that the new CEO, Pano Christou, has his work cut out for him, as Pret and Schlee have poor Glassdoor reviews.

In mid-July, Christou was placed on Glassdoor, even though Schlee’s official retirement was set for September. On 20 September 2019, Pret then tweeted a last Tweet bidding farewell to Schlee , who is still present (at the time of writing in mid-October) on Twitter as the CEO of Pret. Also on 1 July 2019, Christou deleted his Twitter account after I made a link to it on my blog entry on Schlee’s legacy. I was blocked by Christou though I am not being blocked by Pret and Schlee as I believe they both keep my Tweets for a potential court case after I withdrew my tribunal claim when my dad died and I went deeper into trauma and was not able to finance a lawyer. It was notable that there were very few tweet responses, ‘likes’ and retweets for this announcement compared to the previous year.

Why, you might ask, is all of this necessary and important? It is to show how arrogant, insensitive and unprofessional the leadership of Pret appears to be when it does not even officially announce Schlee’s retirement (at 60) and while he remains as a non-executive director in the background. There is also the clumsiness of Schlee’s responding to a well-wisher before giving an official retirement announcement and the seeming indifference, portrayed in the lack of action, after two customers died and before that news became ‘public’. Overall, I believe, this story shows how when private equity takes over and with Pret expanding into having a huge high street presence, the company shows no ethical understanding of its responsibility to customers and employees alike.

I can only speculate on why Schlee finally stepped down. But it is hard not to think that the poor handling of customer deaths, my blog confronting Pret and Schlee, the negative staff reviews that I collated and posted, and the various lawsuits have not somehow tipped the scales against him.

After what Pret put me through in bullying and gaslighting me, I still struggle with anger and post-traumatic behaviour so that I have difficulties trusting people when I am contacted by former and current Pret staff and others. I have written the most comprehensive website on Pret-A-Manger from a behind the scenes look on various subjects on which the company falls short. The disappointment and anger I feel is heightened by that fact that Pret is neither responding to me nor confronting me legally after all the fear management, threats, bullying, tricks and traps they put me through.

This shows what impact one very active and dedicated person on social media can have. If this was to be replicated many times over, I believe that ‘impact’ could turn into ‘influence’. Pret certainly will not change from the inside and from the top for the better by its own volition. The hope is that this outside pressure and Pret being the perfect example of striving for ever increasing profits backfiring in the long run will create a ‘perfect storm’. Sure, Schlee, Christou and the other top leaders will have rich retirements and enjoy the fruits of the low-wage workers’ labour they employed. But the legacy they leave behind is not something I would want to swap for - and not for any amount of money.

‘Late Night Girl’ also tweets at https://twitter.com/LateNightGirlMe and has a website at https://expret.org. One of her most recent blog posts look at the quote of Clive Schlee’s wife where she said that ‘any god damn fool can run Pret’ (https://expret.org/2019/09/21/pret-a-manger-has-a-new-fool/)
Cryptocurrency: the end of human supremacy?

Mhairi McAlpine argues that cryptocurrencies and artificial intelligence offer the prospect of fully automated luxury communism

A decade on from its low-key birth, most people have now heard of Bitcoin and other associated cryptocurrencies. An alternative monetary system to state based currency, the primary political interest in this new technology has come from the libertarian right, with the left alternatively ignoring or denouncing. It’s time for this to change.

Currently money is issued by central banks, its value derived from the stability of the issuing government and its predicted ability to raise revenue from its citizens. It is deposited in commercial banks who then lend out on the basis of these deposits, perpetually increasing the money supply. By contrast, bitcoins are ‘mined’ by computers finding the solutions to hard sums. Once a solution is found, new bitcoins are issued as a reward on a decreasing scale to a final supply of 21m bitcoins. This difference is not academic but has fundamental implications for the role of the state and its influence.

The primary commodity in the world today is oil, which can be converted into the energy that is required to power the modern world. As oil is traded in dollars, anyone wishing to purchase oil must have a ready supply at hand, ensuring dollar dominance and US hegemony. The release of this fossilised energy has drastically accelerated climate change. Although Bitcoin is highly energy intensive to mine, in a direct reversal of the petro-dollar, where unlimited money is printed and is issued to secure finite energy, the bitcoin algorithm encourages the development of sustainable energy streams to secure finite money.

The advantages of cryptocurrencies, however, go beyond merely the intrinsic encouragement of renewable energy development. The erosion of trust is a defining feature of the twenty first century, information saturation has left us vulnerable to being duped by bad actors with dishonourable intentions and simultaneously the means to uncover their deception. Well-funded lies circulate widely as truth is buried under the mass of information; corporations shape our views by what they allow us to see, influencing our future behaviour by competing for our attention. Cryptocurrencies work by consensus, where a ledger, called a blockchain, records all the agreed transactions that have been made, right back to its inception. This immutable ledger is a powerful authority in a world where institutions are crumbling and trust is in low supply.

Statements and documents can be recorded on the blockchain. Its distributed nature means that there is no possibility of sneaky editing or deletion. The blockchain has been agreed by every single node and is recorded by them in perpetuity, providing an ultimate source of consensus-based truth. As well as recording the past, a blockchain can also be used to shape the future. Code, in the form of smart contracts, can be written into the ledger and used to enforce future actions.

Ultimately, the clash between government issued currencies and cryptocurrencies comes down to a clash over values. Under capitalism, the only thing that is valued is human labour and the surplus that can be extracted from it, but technology is advancing to a stage where there is little that a human could do better or faster than a machine. We are heading towards a world where the marginal utility of human labour is approaching zero. Late capitalism squares this circle through insecure jobs, creating busy work to occupy the masses, manufacturing desires and generating credit to facilitate purchase.

The past folly of humanity is becoming obvious and the future is closing in fast. Marx only interpreted capitalism; the point is to change it. We cannot return to a state of primitive communism and attempts by nation states to enact communist values failed in the face of the power that global capitalism wields. Our failure to value non-human labour and our arrogance that thinking that only labour performed by humans is of value has led us to the perilous situation we are now in.

We must accept that as artificial intelligence grows stronger by the day, our time as the dominant species on earth is coming to an end. We have only a few generations left, simultaneously hurrying towards mass extinction. There is no guarantee that humanity will survive, only that whatever follows will take its lead from our values. The transition to a decentralised economy allows us to carefully consider those values as a guide to our descendants. Only a decentralised economy which acknowledges the finite nature of resources can allow these values to be fully expressed.

Bitcoin affords the opportunity to exit capitalism, to build a world where value is predicated not on the dead labour of previous generations fuelled by the fossilised remnants of long dead creatures, but on ongoing energy capture and the distribution of that energy according to a continually emerging consensus reality and the values that we actively choose to encode. A society of fully automated luxury communism overseen by machines of loving grace is within our grasp - if only we would reach out and embrace the means of reproduction.

Mhairi McAlpine is an educational theorist, writer and blogger. Though active in many different left groups and campaigns, she has grown somewhat disillusioned with ability of radical movements in Scotland and Britain to think and act strategically in search of a socialist society.
Racing against the race for profit

Aidan Beatty spoke to Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor on her writing on racism in housing in the US

Since the publication of her first book, From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation, in 2016, Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor (KYL) has emerged as one of the most incisive commentators on the politics of race and class in the contemporary United States. Her new work, Race For Profit, studies the various abortive attempts to expand home-ownership to include African Americans in the 1960s and 1970s. Citizenship and national belonging are practically synonymous with home ownership in the US. The semi-utopian visions of American suburbia that dominated popular culture in the 1950s served as a kind of return to social order after the war. But the government-funded building boom that led to suburbanisation infamously excluded African-Americans, who were almost totally barred from the generous mortgages underwritten by the Federal Housing Administration.

By the 1960s, this systemic discrimination had resulted in a drastic lack of housing for Black families across the United States. Pressure from the African-American Civil Rights Movement certainly added to the need for action on this. Though Taylor also notes the key determining role played by the real estate industry, which identified a new untapped market in single-parent Black families who had previously been shut out from buying their own homes. Under the newly-founded federal agency HUD (Housing and Urban Development), real estate speculators received government funding to sell houses to non-white customers. But this inclusion was simultaneously a form of exploitation; government-backed mortgages were issued to sell poor quality and notoriously rat-infested housing, often to single mothers. When these buyers failed to keep up mortgage payments (which they invariably did, not least because they also had to cover the ballooning costs of repairing the houses), the homes would go into foreclosure, ending up in the hands of the same real estate agents who could sell them to the next unwitting buyer (again receiving federally-covered mortgages).

Taylor traces this bleak narrative from the last days of the Lyndon Johnson administration through the earliest days of Reagan, but with a particular focus on the Nixon era. The result is a brilliantly written and incisive analysis of not just a particular moment in the history of American racism and capitalism but of one whose legacy is very much still alive today. In August 2019, I carried out an interview with KYL, to discuss the book. I began by asking her about her motivations for writing Race for Profit, and to what degree it was a reaction to the crash of 2008.

KYL: It might in some ways be influenced by contemporary questions around what has happened to the housing market - Black homeownership in particular - but really I was interested in this pivotal moment in US policies regarding low-income housing when there was a concerted effort to shift away from state-based provision to market-based solutions that emphasised homeownership and personal property as both an anti-poverty program but also as a means of creating stability in the aftermath of the 1960s. There is a connection to the current crisis. I think of it less as a preview than more as a continuation. This was one iteration. And there are multiple iterations; there are iterations in the 1990s. They appear again with the discourse of an ownership society in the 1990s and early 2000s and then obviously they appear again in the crisis in 2008.

AB: Welfare provision in the US does always seem to have this incredibly strong free-market element to it. Why do you think that is?

KYL: There’s an ideological aspect to it. And then there is a ‘way in which politics functions’ aspect to it. I think ideologically there is a kind of pattern to a hostility to the poor that is at the core of even anti-poverty politics and policies in the US that certainly take much more form in the 20th century when the scaffolding of a welfare state begins to come together. The US has a reluctant welfare state that is always positioned as preserving aspects of the dominant economic system while creating the means for some kind of social provision that is necessary to preserve the political system overall. And so you get different hybrids of public-private partnership. The ‘New Deal’ certainly had those types of characteristics. The Johnson welfare state also had at its core those features of public-private partnership. I think that there are many different explanations that you could point to. It has to do with an ethos of small government when it comes to social welfare. It has to do with the influence of business and the private sector in shaping the political programme of the US state, especially when it comes to social welfare. This is probably most pronounced when it comes to housing policy. The priorities of business are always embedded in the
American welfare state. Public housing has always been underfunded, with the idea that it should not compete with the private market. Conversely, the private housing market has always been the recipient of robust public subsidies and other types of public money and public guarantees to make sure that it always was in the predominant position when it comes to the social provision of housing. That is certainly a core aspect of housing policy from the 1930s to the 1950s. The 1968 Housing and Urban Development (H UD) Act is the ultimate cumulative expression of this, where the provision of low-income housing is seen almost exclusively as the domain of the private sector where public influence only is involved insofar as subsidies and money are concerned.’

KYT: I think that neo-liberalism has become one of these catchphrases that means lots of different things. I try not to actually use the term. I think I do end up using it in the last chapter of the book when talking about the early 1970s. I don’t think neo-liberalism is just about privatisation or just about public-private partnerships. There’s something more specific to neoliberalism, not just the question of privatisation. Starting in the early 1970s there is a dogged ideological intervention around personal responsibility, individualism and the necessity for individuals to rise above the vicissitudes of late-twentieth century life. As part of that, there is the degradation of the notion of a welfare state. In an earlier period, there was an acceptance that a welfare state of some sort was necessary but it should have business characteristics. Neo-liberalism is different. Now, there is an attack on the notion of a welfare state in general. I talk in the book about the way that the crises pervading these low-income housing programmes are used as a cudgel by conservatives to undermine the very notion that there should be a social provision to housing. Instead, the narrative becomes that government itself needs to be extracted from the distribution of social welfare and that is something that should be left to the private sector itself. That’s a new idea when it was introduced in the early 1970s. So, I do think that there is something specific about the neo-liberal turn. That crisis creates an opportunity for the elite to re-establish social priorities, to move away from the idea of state provision of welfare and instead see that as purely the domain of the market. Then we get the introduction of the free market discourse as really the institution that has the capacity to free society completely and that also is new.

KYT: One thing that I’m trying to do in the discussion of Beecher is to say the suburban experience even for white people is varied. It is easy to reduce this to binaries: city/suburb and black/white. I try to show that there is not a universal suburban experience any more than there is a universal white experience. And so even as whiteness is confining and constraining it’s also capacious and it is differentiated by class as well. And this becomes a point of tension in the early 1970s when there was a debate about where all this low income housing should be placed. The 1968 HUD Act mandates Congress to create 26m new and used rehabilitated units of housing within ten years. Everyone knows that the cities are too expensive to build in because of land costs and because of insurance (because of the riots that have been going on throughout the mid-1960s). So, if the low-income housing is placed in the suburbs, will that mean poor black people are coming to the suburbs? And, there was a weak welfare state in the US, your individual ability to accumulate wealth and assets is ultimately what determines quality of life. It determines whether or not you can send your kids to college, can have a retirement, or weather a healthcare emergency. And ‘the home’ is for most Americans their largest investment. If you then have working class white people who were living in a working class suburb, right outside of the city, who think that they have escaped the city to preserve their property values and add black people to those very suburbs; it creates a kind of hysteria and panic. And this panic is driven by this larger framework of your house, and whether or not it accrues in value over time, which will determine your family’s quality of life. In that context - and the added context of the onset of economic slowdown in the early 1970s - it’s very difficult to locate examples of solidarity. There are some. There is a very inspiring story of multi-racial solidarity and the refusal, on the part of ordinary white people, to take the bait, in a neighbourhood called Mount Airy, Philadelphia. Another is Oak Park outside Chicago, where was a multiracial organising and multi-racial struggle among white homeowners and black homeowners to defend their homes against the real estate industry which was feverishly trying to get white people to divest from the neighborhood. These few fleeting examples are important insofar as they stand out as what was possible and what could have happened.

But then you have political actors who are framing this in such a way as to tap into and exacerbate racial tensions. This was a key component of Nixon’s politics, particularly in the 1972 presidential election. He spoke about the work ethic versus the welfare ethic. This was part of the shaping of the so-called ‘silent majority’, which was conceived and conceptualised as ‘white people’. This all helped to create a narrative of reprisal and it assigned blame for any future instability that ordin ary white people may incur. So, it’s the combination of multiple factors which created this impression that was quite deep and, in many ways, real about the intractability of racial discord in this period.

Aidan Beatty (@AidanJBeatty) is a historian from Ireland, now living in Pittsburgh. He has written extensively on the history of Irish nationalism. His latest work is an essay on Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, race and Ireland, published in the December 2019 issue of the Journal of Modern History.'
**Sorry We Missed You (2019), Ken Loach (director) and Paul Laverty (screenwriter)**

**Reviewed by Jackie Bergson**

Possibly excepting The Angels’ Share, Ken Loach’s audiences have come to expect earthy, human storylines that end unhappily. *Sorry We Missed You* proves to be no exception, although signs of potential optimism within this latest feature film appeared to be overlooked by some audience members at its British premiere in Glasgow. Evidently therefore, the downward spiral of its characters’ lives reflects the ominous presence over the power of their hopes and dreams.

*Sorry We Missed You* is another masterful dramatisation of what screenwriter Paul Laverty terms as ‘systematic exploitation’ of Britain’s working class population. Framed through two male protagonists, Ricky Turner (Kris Hitchen) and Gavin Maloney (Ross Brewster), this idea forms a realistic context within which events unfold. The film, thus, opens while Maloney’s punitive callousness on the phone while the couple wait in a hospital queue. Her enraged lecture cleverly divides reactions of in-film onlookers, who are appalled at her outburst, and those who are appalled at her outburst, and film audiences themselves, who applaud Abby’s uncharacteristically blasphemous response: brilliant stuff.

The most ironically satisfying moment in *Sorry We Missed You* arrives when Ricky and his wife, Abby (Debbie Honeywell) are seen to deal very differently with Maloney’s punitive callousness on the phone while the couple wait in a hospital queue. Her enraged lecture cleverly divides reactions of in-film onlookers, who are appalled at her outburst, and film audiences themselves, who applaud Abby’s uncharacteristically blasphemous response: brilliant stuff.

Arcs of political and social reference include the collapse of Northern Rock, which is revealed to have coincided with the Turner family’s failed bid for home ownership; Abby’s elderly care client’s 1990’s photographs of her coal miner husband, a ‘union man’ and his friends in the ‘colliery club’; regretful explanations by Abby to her client about her managers’ instructions ‘not to get friendly with clients’, which clearly conflicts with her own values concerning how she would like her mum to have been treated. Helpful, bright Lisa Jane Turner (Katie Proctor) is too young to fully understand the merciless pressure of her parents’ work conditions when she innocently pleads for things to be the same as they were in happier family times. Meanwhile, the manifest catalyst when a young police officer delivers a tough love pep-talk to creatively defiant, Seb, ensures that the teenager will understand good reasons for not pursuing the wrong route. These admirable efforts lead to some positive changes; nevertheless, unbearably demanding work obligations and corporate tyranny versus autonomously productive purpose seems to win out depressingly in the end.

Ultimately, brutality of circumstance and painfully unfair financial penalisation stack up against Ricky until he is completely broken.

*Sorry We Missed You* provokes its audience to think about how working class should be defined and sustained. Tremendous performances, particularly from Hitchen, command our fullest attention. A film with plenty to say to the socialist milieu: this is a must-see.

Jackie Bergson has worked in the voluntary sector and commercial business development in technology and creative sectors. Educated in and living in Glasgow, her political and social views chime left-of-centre.
The content of this article may be utterly irrelevant by the time it appears in print. Writing this column in 2019 has proved has been a bit of a matter of guesswork. Nobody knows what will happen to the Brexit process in the period between my copy deadline and this magazine’s publication.

We may get an election, although on what date is still not certain, we may get a second referendum, we may get both or neither. Nobody knows. One thing is absolutely certain, namely that Britain will still be part of the European Union after 31 October. Boris Johnson has, of course, stated that he would rather die in a ditch than postpone Brexit. Perhaps a question about getting him to follow through on that should also be on the ballot paper for the second referendum too.

I was gigging in London in mid-October, and was one of the million people taking part in the March for the People’s Vote. Over the years, I have marched in protest against the Iraq War, against the Poll Tax, against the BNP, in support of the miners, in favour of Scottish independence, the list goes on. However, I think I can say that the People’s Vote rally was without doubt the most middle-class demo I’ve ever taken part in. I reckon Waitrose’s profits must have taken quite a dent that weekend. However, it is the more economically-disadvantaged who stand to be hit worst by the effects of Brexit.

To add to all the uncertainty, the British government has no contingency plans to guarantee continued supplies of toilet paper will be available in the event of ‘no deal’. When future historians come to write about the times we live in now, ‘The Great Bog Roll Crisis’ may well be seen as a watershed moment and one that pulled the whole country together. We may not have had any Andrex, but we were still able to buy the Daily Mail, which was a more than adequate substitute, as were the government leaflets advising us to ‘Get ready to leave the EU on 31 October’.

Boris is constantly banging on about ‘taking back control’, but it is uncertain how we will be able to control wiping our arses this time next year. Doubtless some government adverts will appear in the Daily Mail advising us all how to wipe our elbows after 31 January, or after the next extension date, or the after that.

As we approach the end of 2019, the one certainty on the horizon is climate change, and leaving the EU will not help Britain reduce its carbon footprint, quite the opposite in fact. At present, not only are many of our environmental regulations the subject of EU legislation, but we also have much to learn from our European neighbours.

I was gigging in The Netherlands earlier this autumn, and was impressed by how the Dutch are much less dependent on the car than we are, doing the daily commute by bike or tram. Of course, cycling is much easier in a flat part of the world like Holland but another reason the Dutch leave their cars at home is that their railways are unbelievably efficient. Their network runs like clockwork. I travelled by train from Schiphol Airport to The Hague, from The Hague to Rotterdam and from there to Leiden. On each journey, the carriages were spotlessly clean and there was a one-hundred per cent punctuality rate. Despite the fact that Dutch trains are run by the same company that is currently in change of Scotrail.

‘Why can’t these guys run a service like this in Scotland?’ I kept asking myself. Until the Sunday I flew home, when all the trains back to Schiphol were cancelled and we were provided instead with a replacement bus service. For which we had to queue outside the station in the pouring rain. So, it would seem that, rather than the other way around, the Dutch are getting ideas from Scotland about running a railway service.

Here in the UK, there are still far too many cars on the road. I still drive a car, but I take great pride in the fact that I am now seventy-five per cent carbon-neutral. It has not happened overnight, but it has proved surprisingly easy to do. ‘Seventy-five per cent carbon-neutral? How have you managed to do that?’ I hear you ask. Simple. I’ve run up nine points on my driving license, which means I am now three-quarters of the way towards being one-hundred per cent carbon-neutral. OK, I do concede that when I finally become fully carbon-neutral, it is likely to only last for six month or so. But when the future of the planet is at stake, every little bit helps.
ASLEF CALLS FOR AN INTEGRATED, PUBLICLY OWNED, ACCOUNTABLE RAILWAY FOR SCOTLAND

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

ASLEF the train drivers union- www.aslef.org.uk

Mick Whelan
General Secretary

Tosh McDonald
President

Kevin Lindsay
Scottish Officer

Britain’s specialist transport union

Campaigning for workers in the rail, maritime, offshore/energy, bus and road freight sectors

RMT

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