We assess the political, social and economic impact of the pandemic, and our governments’ response to it
Strange times, indeed. But maybe not that strange

As Shakespeare’s dark and dystopian verse seems to be commonly quoted in these strange times, I’m reminded of Macbeth’s statement in Act 1 Scene 3: ‘Nothing is but what is not’. So, we have a populist, right-wing and neo-liberal Tory government engaging in the biggest bout of state intervention in living memory. Massive state aid to business and workers as well as restrictions on people’s movements. A veritable Marshall Plan! Labour bailed out the banks but the Tories rescued the workers. It’s enough to have put Corbyn to shame, some say. But is it all it’s cracked up to be as a spectacular volte face?

Scratch beneath the surface a bit and you soon find out that pithy sound bites from the likes of Chancellor, Rishi Sunak - ‘the NHS will get whatever it needs’ - and Boris Johnson - ‘we’ll do what needs to be done’ - are not worth the paper they were not even written upon. Quite apart from the ineptly and incompetently slow response to the spread of the virus – with the whole month of February wasted – it’s not hard to see that ‘Nothing is but what is not’. First, the amount of businesses eligible and able to access the emergency funding has proved to be tiny – so jobs and livelihoods are on the line or already gone. Second, it’s not enough testing and not enough PPE. The Scottish Government had the position as the health service in England - not enough testing and not enough PPE. The Scottish Government had the (devolved) powers to move in a different direction. It was the hapless Catherine Calderwood who told us that testing was a diversion. One wonders about the judgement of Scotland’s former Chief Medical Officer on this and other matters, but also that of Nicola Sturgeon in trying to keep her in her job. This apart, the Scottish Government has had a remarkably easy ride from the media and have faced little political opposition over its handling of the crisis. Partly that is because Nicola Sturgeon and Jean Freeman have come across competently at press conferences and in parliament. But perhaps it is time for more scrutiny and accountability?

If we look elsewhere, we can see again that political choices about how to respond and regulate have been made. Bearing in mind that not all countries are at the same stage in the pandemic, deaths as a proportion of coronavirus cases – a relative measure - still vary quite widely. Of comparable sized countries, Britain and Italy are at 13%, France at 18%, Spain at 10% and Germany at 3%.

Notwithstanding all the failings from Westminster and Holyrood above, the level of state expenditure now shows that austerity really was a political choice and not an economic necessity. The current intervention was brought about by political pressure on the government – not that it necessarily came from the left. It was slow and grudging because all throughout this crisis – and no doubt until it ends and well beyond it too – the response of those that are in the Westminster government has actually been one of a reluctance to deploy state intervention because it goes against their fundamental beliefs of letting the ‘free market’ be free. Our on-theme articles in this issue lay out the various aspects of this historic culpability in chapter and verse. There can be no ‘one nation’ Toryism nor any ‘national unity’ between different classes when one treats the other with such contempt.

That said, there are some even bigger issues at stake. Three of the most obvious ones are: what the crisis says about capitalist society, what’s happening to the workers’ movement, and what the crisis says about throwing alternatives to capitalism. That a whole world economic system can be thrown into jeopardy by a reduction in the levels of activity shows up the fragility of such a system and that its drug of choice is nothing other than the pursuit of profit.

If the global financial crash of 2008–2009 is any guide, then it will take a long time for some groups of workers.
to regain any bargaining strength they might have had due to economic growth being weak and fitful. Defensive battles to try to claw back what was lost will still be the order of the day for a long time to come – even despite some of the victories unions have won in terms of protecting pay and health and safety. But the global financial crash could look like mere child’s play compared to the coming depression – not recession - wreaked by the coronavirus crisis. While capital may not be exactly strengthened by it either, labour could be an awful lot weaker still.

This ties into a more general expected trend. Though we are living through truly unprecedented times, we should not underestimate the clamour for a return to capitalist ‘normality’ – and not just from the capitalists. Whilst it is right that socialists and radicals use the opportunity to raise searching ideological and political questions about the character and consequences of contemporary capitalism, we should harbour no illusions about the ability to affect the desired economic and political change at the moment. The capacity of the radical and revolutionary left – as well as social democratic left - is at a very low ebb. State intervention and seemingly Keynesian reflation measures do not in themselves represent the harbingers of progressive change because they are in place to support the neo-liberal variant of capitalism and will be relatively temporary measures. Indeed, they show the flexibility of the ruling class and its parties to rule in new ways. But just as importantly, workers have an immediate vested interest in returning to ‘normality’ - in other words, the working class wants to be ruled economically in the same way as before - and, critically, they are not fighting in substantial numbers for their own collective betterment. This latter element is the vital missing ingredient if we recall that the period of world revolution after the First World War as any kind of guide for radical social change. So, it is also not beyond the bounds of possibility that the forces of neo-liberalism will come out again stronger than they were before the crisis as per Naomi Klein’s ‘disaster capitalism’ thesis. She argues that neo-liberalism is capable of exploiting national crises to further establish controversial and questionable policies as citizens are too distracted (emotionally and physically) to engage and develop an adequate response, and resist effectively.

All this makes it seem that the Alex Salmond trial and Labour leadership elections were a bit of a storm in a teacup. The Salmond trial was not the blockbuster to shake the SNP to its core as many expected – whatever the outcome. But the sense that nothing much else matters will not last forever as the issues of post-crisis reconstruction (especially on how to pay off government debt, will the ‘blue tide’ over the ‘red wall’ have been a rinse or a dye, whether independence for Scotland is economically feasible) will come to the fore. In Scotland, Salmond’s book and the parliamentary inquiry into the Scottish Government’s handling of the case against Salmond will re-ignite the smouldering embers while Keir Starmer’s believed ability to be electorally credible will be put to the test. Brexit may even get a look in – so departing the EU hasn’t meant the Westminster government has been able to ‘take back control’.

**Feedback**

_A first-time reader, Mary MacCallum Sullivan, reflects on our general election analysis (SLR 115)_

I am ‘of the left’, but have never identified as a Labour supporter, or, indeed, as a socialist. I have no doubt that that position is, generally, shared by many. I enjoyed reading the issue – the first time! But it made me think about all these labels according to which your contributors were identifying, some of them new to me. They often seem to be limited by their history – the movements, I mean.

I have been doing a lot of researching since the disappointing outcomes of the election into where the possibilities lie for political and social action that will bring about the constructive changes needed to address all our social ills but in light of the climate emergency.

I take the view that the climate emergency is, in fact, specifically the outcome of the unbridled capitalism that has been accepted for the last at least 50 years or so as ‘There Is No Alternative’. The current formations of our rulers – big capitalism, the elites, the oligarchies – are arrayed so as to cross national boundaries, permeating the whole of the conditions of our existence, including how we understand those conditions. The intention is to keep us (‘the 99%’) confused, a strategy brilliantly realised in the general election.

The oligarchy and elites are a reactionary force, and will resist taking meaningful action, protecting its status – its safety, its security – until it is much too late for everyone else. The opposition - the resistance - has to be organised nationally, because that how our social and political reality is organised. Of course, there must be international cooperation, but the basis must be national, and by national, I mean, of course, Scotland. We can only start ‘where we are’, but I believe that Scotland currently stands as something of a beacon internationally – many eyes are upon us, and whatever action we are able to take will be noticed, could even be inspirational for other small nations. But Scotland is currently powerless to take any meaningful large-scale action against that large Tory House of Commons majority.

Independence for Scotland is therefore an urgent, and a moral cause. All ‘left’ political formations should be urgently considering how they can best serve the cause of independence in which the ‘left’ voice can make itself more readily heard than in a post-election Britain. At the very least, Kenny MacAskill’s series of citizen’s conventions could include one called for by all the organisations whose representatives have contributed to this particular issue of SLR.

Let all these organisations come together to at least address the question of independence openly and honestly, in light of the bigger, global, picture, and in light of a future which, at this point, looks very unstable and uncertain. The Tory Westminster government has no answers; in fact, it doesn’t even know what the question is.

_Mary MacCallum Sullivan is a psychotherapist and educator with an interest in a more meaningful local and ethical politics._

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Coronavirus crisis: underfunding, restructurung, privatisation and fragmentation at the heart of the crisis in Holyrood and Westminster

Allyson Pollock and Louisa Harding-Edgar say there is also an opportunity to end the neo-liberalism that got us to this point

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here is no doubt that the Westminster government’s delay in implementing public health measures to prevent COVID-19 has cost thousands of lives and enormous hardship for the many millions of people plunged into unemployment and debt. For nearly two months following the first two confirmed case of coronavirus in Britain on 30 January, the Westminster government allowed the virus to let rip throughout our communities with inadequate effort to control or contain it. This was despite the early warnings - via the World Health Organisation (WHO) - from China in January this year and when our newspapers and televisions were covering stories of hospitals in Wuhan being erected in nine days.

Perhaps, the most surprising aspect of the British COVID crisis is that the Scottish Government has allowed its strategy and the operations to be directed by Westminster, which has taken a London-centric approach to the epidemic and with respect to the lock down. And yet the COVID pandemic is not just one big homogenous epidemic. It is made up of hundreds, if not thousands, of outbreaks, each at a different stage, on-going throughout the country. Whereas England had its first confirmed cases on 30 January and first death reported in early March, Scotland did not have its first confirmed cases until the 1 March, this being a traveller returning to Tayside from Northern Italy, and its first death until 17 March. Some parts of Scotland and, indeed England (like Rutland, Hartlepool and Blackpool and Isle of Wight) had no reported cases until late March or early April. So the question is: why did the Scottish Government not demand UK action to seal borders and stop travel, and why did the Scottish Government not build up capacity for contact tracing, take steps to protect those most at risk, and protect some areas so that life could continue, or at the very least that children could continue with their education in unaffected areas?

Greater Glasgow is not the Borders, Lothian is not the Western Isles or Orkney, no more than Ayrshire and Arran are the Highlands or Shetland. As we write this each of these areas and their health boards have their own multiple outbreaks, some smaller and some larger than others, and at different stages, and this means local information is vital as is local tracking and monitoring of the disease. To give Scotland its due, it was quick off the mark in making COVID-19 a notifiable disease and did so some two weeks before England did on 5 March. So at least the surveillance systems were working.

But why did Scotland, where cases were far less numerous than in England, agree to the COBRA decision on 12 March to abandon contact tracing? At that point, there were few confirmed cases in Scotland though reporting of cases does not appear to have begun until 17 March. Our public health colleagues tell us that Public Health England rapidly found it had no capacity to undertake contact tracing: it had fewer than 300 staff to do contact tracing operating out of just 9 regional hubs - there are 343 local authorities.

Structural changes to public health – loss of local capacity and fragmentation

The lack of capacity is down to budget cuts and structural changes that removed and fragmented local public services for communicable disease control in England. Lansley’s Health and Social Care Act 2012 in England carved out public health functions from local health bodies and then further fragmented them, splitting them between local authorities and Public Health England (PHE) – an agency of the Department of Health and Social Care.

PHE now controls the decimated workforce for communicable disease control including the 300 or so field epidemiologists who, instead of being largely based in local authorities, have been centralised in regional hubs, thereby, reducing their numbers and their effectiveness on the ground. Meanwhile, although there are said to be over 5,000 environmental officers in local authorities, some of whom had indicated that they were ready to go and start contact tracing if called upon, no one made contact with them. However, when COBRA made the fatal decision to stop contact tracing PHE had only contacted 3,500 people in Britain of which just 3% were cases and had been told to self-isolate.

The extent to which Scotland, having also centralised its functions under Health Protection Scotland (HPS) had also reduced its capacity for local monitoring of communicable disease control and contact tracing, as well as testing and laboratory facilities, are important questions to be asked. We still don’t have the figures of the number of contacts that were traced in Scotland and had actually been told to self-isolate. But they were unlikely to be more than a handful as of March 12. Nor do we have data on the staffing and numbers of field epidemiologists. The Scottish Government is yet to respond to letters sent in March about the cessation of contact tracing and the parliamentary questions posed.

And so, for 12 days after stopping contact tracing on the 12 March until 23 March the virus was left to tear through our communities. Not only that, but the governments north and south of the border had not put in place travel restrictions and quarantine at the ports of entry for people coming from abroad - it appears Scotland had no powers. But lessons from communicable diseases and previous epidemics have shown that it is vitally important to monitor the ports of entry – harbours and airports. Scotland did not.
Contact tracing and travel restrictions not implemented

The governments had both advance warning of the epidemic and advance sight of the measures that China, Singapore, Hong Kong, and Taiwan had put in place. By 24 February, WHO had published a most compelling and informative WHO China mission report – but as the WHO assistant director general, Bruce Aylward, commented: 'Much of the global community is not yet ready, in mindset and materially, to implement the measures that have been employed to contain COVID-19 in China'. He went on to say: 'These are the only measures that are currently proven to interrupt or minimize transmission chains in humans. Fundamental to these measures is extremely proactive contact tracing to detect cases, very rapid diagnosis and immediate case isolation, rigorous tracking and quarantine of close contacts, and an exceptionally high degree of population understanding and acceptance of these measures'.

In Wuhan, the national lockdown and travel restrictions were accompanied by local intelligence gathering and local, on-the-ground contact tracing and medical observation. Even without mass testing capacity - it appears there were only 10,000 RT-pcr tests conducted in that time in Wuhan with a population of 11m - the Chinese controlled the infection, combining contact tracing with house-to-house symptom checking and quarantining and isolation, travel restrictions, and lock down. All these measures were necessary and had been ramped up. If anything, testing was of far less importance though, of course, a very useful support.

When the epidemic was spreading too fast in some areas in Britain for contact tracing capacity, then the next step should have been to keep disease out of areas which had no cases and to stop all mass gatherings. The Scottish Government could have imposed a cordon sanitaire combined with social distancing around those parts of the country that had no cases, including the Western Isles and Orkney and parts of the Highlands.

It is incomprehensible that Scotland did not argue for introducing travel restrictions internationally and nationally. One of us travelled through the airports of London and Edinburgh when the epidemic was kicking off in Italy in early March without being stopped or advised to go into quarantine, while watching with concern as flights flew in from Venice, Milan, Rome, and Bergamo. As the epidemic was raging in Italy, the government allowed the transmission of the virus across the border as plane loads of infected skiers from Austria and tourists and visitors from Italy made their way back to Britain. Indeed, Britain has still not stopped international travel (see table below) - planes are still flying in and out without the passengers being stopped and checked and warned to quarantine for 14 days. As of 15 April, plane loads of Romanians are being flown in to fruit pick, despite the millions unemployed and in furlough and despite Brexit. And yet at the same time, people are being fined for making unnecessary journeys in their local areas.

Instead of designing an employment plan and an industrial strategy to enable people to have decent terms and conditions of employment and make the work attractive, the government has prioritised the interests of the food industry, which is dominated by just five multinationals. Is Scotland doing the same? Are workers coming from outside the UK also being admitted without our knowledge?

As for mass gatherings, Nicola Sturgeon did impose a ban on gatherings over 500 on 12 March but that was not enough to prevent super-spreaders and it was too little too late. Meanwhile, England allowed huge spectacles and public events like the Cheltenham Gold Cup.

The vulnerable were failed because social care is fragmented, privatised and underfunded

And now the grim news. More than 80% of the deaths are in those aged 70 years and over with the majority of deaths occurring in those aged over 80 years. In the week ending 19 April, 46% of all COVID deaths in Scotland were in nursing homes (Herald 22 April 2020) where elderly people are incarcerated increasingly in solitary confinement and dying without their relatives. And yet, this is the very group government measures were supposed to shield. Somehow PPE, staffing, and nursing home guidance got lost in the equation.

There are 1.5m care workers in Britain, of which some 148,000 people work in adult social care in Scotland – 6% of the Scottish total workforce and comparable to the numbers in our Scottish National Health Service. In social care the private sector is the biggest employer, employing 59,400 people. Staff shortages in social care are a huge problem, particularly for the private sector. As of December 2018 in Scotland, well before the COVID epidemic, 9% of local authority care homes and 52% of private care homes had nursing vacancies. At the beginning of April, care homes in Scotland reported absence levels of 30% of their current staff (BBC Scotland News 11 April 2020). In the UK, a quarter of care home staff are on zero hours contracts. No sick pay means people must attend work even when sick, and carers move from home to home, often as agency workers, to fill staffing gaps.

Although the Scottish Government recently increased pay to at least £9.30/hour, this is still only equivalent to the real living wage (BBC Scotland News 12 April 2020). Care workers were going into work ill because they cannot afford to be off work on statutory sick pay (Guardian 7 April 2020) and now the Scottish Government is having to provide funding to third sector and independent providers specifically to ensure staff receive sick pay if they are off work ill or because they are self-isolating (Scottish Government news release 12 April 2020). And to add to this shameful situation in which hospital
patients recovering from COVID-19 are being moved into nursing homes, relatives are being bombarded with DNR (Do Not Resuscitate) forms, doctors no longer need to see the body when signing the death certificate and many patients are dying in nursing homes having seen no medical practitioner in their last days. It took until 15 April for the Scottish Government to announce that all symptomatic care home staff and residents would be tested, and longer to actually roll out a testing system for this group.

This disaster has hit a system that was already under impossible strain due to years of underfunding. Scottish Government funding to councils since 2013/14 has fallen in real terms and is forecast to fall further. This is despite an estimated increase of 18-29% in need for health and social care services in Scotland by 2030. Audit Scotland has raised concerns about the financial sustainability of the Integrated Joint Boards (IJBs), which are responsible for planning local health and social care services in Scotland. In their 2018/19 plans there was a budget gap of £208m. The majority of IJBs struggle to break even, with some requiring additional funding.

For profit care homes and poor quality care

The majority of care homes in Scotland are private for profit (59%), with voluntary or not-for-profit providers accounting for 27% of the sector and local authority or Health Board provision for 14%. In Scotland, there are 32,691 residents in care homes for older people and 26,053 of these are in private care homes. 67,985 people received home care during January to March 2018. The number of local authority and NHS care homes for adults in Scotland decreased by 31% between 2007 and 2017, while a 21% decrease was seen in the private sector in this time. This is despite the number of residents in private care homes increasing by 6%.

Four Seasons is a large multinational with 15 care homes in Scotland and yet the Financial Times (9 February 2020) has reported that ‘tracing the finances at Four Seasons is all but impossible; the company’s sprawling structure consists of 200 companies arranged in 12 layers in at least five jurisdictions, including several offshore territories’ and that £71 per bed goes towards debt repayment. Despite this, its highest paid director received £1.58 million in 2016. Four Seasons health care went into administration in April 2019.

Data from the US has shown that those nursing homes with the highest profit margins are of the poorest quality. This effect is seen in the UK too: 84% of care homes run by local authorities were rated good or outstanding, compared with just 77% of for-profit homes, according to Lang Buison in August 2019.

This is truly an appalling situation. On top of this has been the lack of PPE for social care workers and health care workers and residents and relatives. This shameful situation also raises questions about the Scottish Government procurement policy for supplies and logistics of delivery and its contracting of PPE. Above all, it raises questions about its preparedness. In summer 2015, the Scottish Government conducted an exercise called ‘Silver Swan’ to gauge the level of preparedness for a national flu pandemic. Its report, however, is not publicly available so we do not know what all the recommendations were.

COVID collateral damage

At the same time, the collateral damage from the lockdown is being felt. There are rising numbers of excess deaths from non-corna causes as people die at home instead of calling an ambulance and all routine and elective care is cancelled. Community services have been cancelled so there is no hands-on chiropody, physiotherapy, mental health services, and occupational and speech therapy. These are vital services for older people and telephone calls are a poor substitute. Older people, once again, are the users of these services currently being denied to them. Meanwhile, in many hospitals, wards are half empty and some staff under-occupied waiting for the tsunami. Bed occupancy has fallen and need is rising.

Way forward

With the lockdown possibly continuing until at least the beginning of June, the Scottish Government needs to develop its own local action plans around easing restrictions locally. First, it needs to put public health and communicable disease control experts in the driving seat of the Scottish Government COVID-19 advisory group. Second, we need to have the humility to learn from our colleagues in China, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan. It is astonishing to hear people say: ‘Oh, the British people won’t tolerate authoritarianism - what works there won’t work here’. But look at how our country has been transformed and how we have complied. Indeed, the draconian COVID legislation caused the former judge, Jonathon Sumption, to say the way the police enforced regulations was like a police state.

And this brings us to human rights. Scotland was working to put human rights at the heart of its policies and in advancing the cause of social, economic, and cultural rights. COVID has not only set this work back, it has set back human rights. Children are being denied their human right to an education. Meanwhile, the Disability Law Service condemned the COVID legislation as regressive and punitive for older people and people with disabilities, reducing care to essential services necessary to comply with basic human rights. This legislation is resulting in untold damage for mental health and physical wellbeing, for older people and those with learning disabilities.

Third, as well as tracking the epidemic nationally, we need to go local and understand the epidemic in each local area. This requires contact tracing. The Welsh first Minister Mark Drakeford in his press conference on 21 April, outlined that local public health surveillance measures would be needed to control the ‘inevitable’ spread of the virus within communities once lockdown restrictions are eventually lifted.

He went on to confirm that council public health teams, along with other environmental health colleagues, would be mobilised to spot, trace and isolate new cases of the virus and … it is also likely that many more people will need to be recruited to help with the work ‘on the ground’.

We need to use local public health teams to work with local authorities on local COVID surveillance to see where cases are and where they are continuing to spread. It is vital to stop transmission from person to person and the spread of infection, and that means identifying the reservoirs of infection by tracking every case and quarantining contacts.

We need to rebuild capacity for contact tracing using local volunteers, health workers, the army, teachers, students etc for tracking and tracing in each local authority and health board, and environmental health officers and public health and communicable disease consultants should be driving it in each local health board and local authority.
GP practices must also be involved and given data on cases and contacts in their practices. Local laboratory facilities for testing must be restored and not outsourced.

All this requires data, which has to be meticulously collected and reported in real time at local level and include details on cases and contacts by ward, ethnicity, occupation, gender and age and hospitalisation. The Westminster government’s own recent scientific evidence clearly demonstrates through mathematical modelling that effective contact tracing and case finding is likely to remain a highly effective approach after lockdown and that a local approach is vital and will enable restrictions to be lifted following local risk assessment.

Fourth, we need to put in place a radical plan for the NHS and social care. In effect the capacity of the NHS and its staff is what dictated our response to the epidemic. Around the 23 March, the modellers confronted the government with the terrifying spectre of hundreds of thousands of people dying in hospitals that were overwhelmed and could not cope, and of refrigerator trucks piled up in hospital car parks to of thousands of people dying in the epidemic. Around the 23 March, the modellers confronted the government with the terrifying spectre of hundreds of thousands of people dying in hospitals that were overwhelmed and could not cope, and of refrigerator trucks piled up in hospital car parks to take away the bodies of the dead who had not received the care they needed. The Chancellor’s budget announcement on 11 March that the NHS would receive £6bn over the course of five years suggested it would wipe out trust deficits but this did not go far enough. Both Westminster and the Scottish Governments should be reopening the PFI contracts and renegotiating the interest rates, just as large stores have been renegotiating their rental charges down with the property owners. Interest rates are at their lowest ever (0.11%) and yet PFI debt interest payments vary from 5% to 16%. The Scottish Government should now be bringing forward a radical plan to re-integrate health and social care and to renationalise nursing home services in order to rebuild capacity. Much of the problem in social care is due to the involvement of private equity investors which have resulted in quality falling with low staffing levels and poor pay and conditions. Britain has privatised more of its nursing homes than the US - 86% are private for profit. The solution is not to throw more money at them.

Much is made of the ‘Dunkirk spirit’ and the war time effort – but buildings have not been bombed. Neither have airports or factories, or homes. We still have the chance to take the road not yet travelled. A progressive government would see COVID-19 as an opportunity for the rebuilding of our economy and industry and ensuring the renationalisation of our essential services like water, electricity and gas, telecoms and transport and our ports - this epidemic has shown how vital access to and local control over public services is. Services that have been part privatised should be renationalised (social care, some public laboratories and testing and data facilities). Intellectual property and patent laws need to be urgently changed in favour of the public with the government issuing compulsory licenses to stop the exploitation of patents for medicines, vaccines, medical tests, and tests and reagents. And, in return for bailing out companies and businesses, the government should ensure it has a stake in them so that when the good times return the public sector sees those returns and not the shareholders which have done so well in recent years. To take the road not taken since the 2008 financial crisis is essential if we are to address and remedy the poverty, inequality, and injustices brought about by the austerity of the last ten years.

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COVID 19: government failures counter-balanced by solutions from unions & NGOs

Andrew Watterson says unions must be part of the post-crisis economic and social reconstruction

Pandemics cannot be avoided but COVID-19 has shown that Britain could and should have done a lot better to protect its workforce, protect the public and, hence, protect the economy too. April saw the Society of Occupational Medicine along with a range of professional bodies issue a belated but very welcome statement calling for zero workplace fatalities in health and social care due to COVID-19. This should have been the starting point for the Westminster and Holyrood governments, through testing, preventing transmission and protecting all groups of workers at risk from COVID immediately. Such a strategy would have reduced the number of COVID cases, hence, reducing the threat to health workers and other workers of contracting the disease. This, in turn, would have ensured health workers were available to treat what should then have been a much smaller number of COVID cases.

Corona viruses have been around a long time. Some but not all had little effect on humans: not so new COVID-19. Nevertheless, there have been warnings for months about the pandemic threats from this virus. For years, Westminster and devolved governments had been warned to plan for pandemics too using World Health Organisation (WHO), International Labour Organisation (ILO) and other international pandemic guides and manuals. Such planning, including storing basic PPE for health and other workers, often does not require rocket science. Yet, here we are four months after the Chinese COVID-19 outbreak and still our health workers, care workers, service workers remain at risk and PPE – supply, suitability and replacement – continues to be problematic to say the least.

At the same time, we have Westminster and sometimes Scottish - government ministers and civil servants ironically telling us not to be complacent and to act responsibly in the face of the pandemic. It is clear who has been complacent and who has been irresponsible in pandemic planning and protecting workers. It is not the public or workers themselves, their unions and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) who have been far more active flagging up the risks of COVID and precautions needed than many politicians and regulators? Why is this?

Occupational health and safety, a reserved matter, has been a Cinderella in the funding and staffing policies and practices of successive Westminster governments over decades. Neither Scottish workers nor the Scottish Government have control over either the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) regulator or health and safety laws (Scottish local authorities will enforce some Westminster health and safety laws mainly in smaller workplaces). Worse than that, the HSE has been a specific target in the last decades for those wishing to cut red tape through deregulation, so-called ‘better regulation’ or ‘smarter regulation’. Such policies have damaged inspections, monitoring, information and advice and enforcement on workplace risks. This probably meant that HSE checks on the health and safety aspects of pandemic planning in hospitals and social care either did not occur or at best were limited. Prior to COVID-19, many workers in Scotland were already dying from occupational diseases and large numbers had been made ill by work each year.

Running parallel with these cuts and ideological attacks came significant budget and staffing cuts in the NHS and public health: most pronounced in England, less so in Scotland. Juxtaposing these two elements with the possibility of a pandemic which could take out key workers in acute, primary and social care, and also from key parts of our economy, and a perfect storm looms. The Scottish Government at times appears to be guided by ideologically driven Westminster politicians, UK NHS medical advisors and Public Health England (PHE) leaders. Westminster initially ignored WHO advice, global experts on pandemics and the most recent experience of COVID-19 in China, South Korea, Germany and Denmark, delaying early and extensive lockdown measures and testing. Scotland’s government tended on occasions to follow this lead. Key testing epidemiology principles were ignored and this may have resulted in more workers exposed to COVID-19 than elsewhere in Europe. PHE at the beginning did not address the PPE needs of non-health workers faced with COVID exposure either quickly enough or at all in some cases. Non-health workers fell through the PPE gap and the HSE effectively remained passive on COVID.

Additionally, PPE advice from these government bodies has been constantly changing. Westminster and Holyrood governments may have considered there could be no circumstances whereby health and safety cuts would ever be immediately and publicly visible in a pandemic. They were wrong. The continuing lack of effective PPE for doctors, nurses, paramedics, other health and emergency workers, shop workers, call centre and transport workers, construction workers, care workers, prison police and fire officers - who face COVID-19 risks - appears daily in our newspapers, on TV and radio. PPE failures have repercussions for both pandemic patient treatment and the workers themselves. Health staff shortages through COVID and self-isolation put additional pressures on remaining staff in terms of fatigue and stress. So testing, tracing, isolation and lockdown policy failures damaged the NHS workforce directly and indirectly adding to hazardous and risky NHS and social care working conditions.

Some have argued no pandemic could have been foreseen or foreseen on the scale that COVID-19 has (so far) affected the world. Others argue all the planning necessary for a pandemic had been done and no country could have done more to protect the health and safety of its health care professional related workforce. They are wrong. Coronavirus were first identified in animals in the 1930s, then in humans in the 1960s. The new COVID-19 emerged
in 2019 but the possible pandemic effects of such viruses had been flagged repeatedly in 2005, 2009, 2015, 2019 and early 2020 by WHO and other organisations. In 2005, the International Health Regulations bound every country to prioritise and dedicate domestic resources and recurrent spending for pandemic preparedness. PPE availability problems were noted internationally in pandemic planning assessments and specifically flagged in Britain throughout the 2010s. Ignoring these warnings demonstrated ‘wilful ignorance’ on the part of some British government and scientific civil servants.

In Scotland, it was apparent early on that not all workers at risk from COVID-19 – for example, those in social and home care settings, emergency workers such as firefighters, the police and paramedics – had been recognised in pandemic planning or operationalisation. Problems then emerged with suitable and sufficient PPE supply in hospitals, GP practices, residential homes, social care, transport and other service and emergency settings services. Even basic requirements such as hand sanitisers were not being met. In April, over three months after COVID19 was confirmed in China, RCN Scotland still expressed concerns about whether staff had the PPE they needed not just in the NHS - in the communities, in the care homes, in the hospices, wherever care is being provided. BMA raised similar PPE concerns for medical staff.

Many Scottish workers also faced the double jeopardy of either losing their jobs or carrying on working in what might be hazardous employment. The ILO and international union organisations in their pandemic planning publications in the 2000s indicated the need to protect all workers economically during a pandemic, especially those in precarious employment and in the gig economy.

In contrast to these governmental, agency and sometimes employer pandemic planning and action failures, the unions and their representatives along with NGOs like the UK Hazards Campaign acted. They quickly identified hitherto neglected ‘at risk’ workers and pressed for effective policing of workplace social distancing, closure of non-essential work, early lockdowns – topics on which the Scottish Government led the UK government - and PPE. The TUC, STUC, hazards groups, unions including the GMB, UNITE, UNISON, FBU, POA, Police Federation, RCN and BMA, and professional bodies all provided good health and safety information on COVID and mooted immediate solutions for their members along with the need for economic support and job security. Unions use a precautionary approach to risks from hazards. The precautionary public health principle geared to prevention should have been adopted by governments throughout Britain to tackle the pandemic at the beginning. It is difficult to envisage a public health threat that could have warranted a more precautionary approach than a pandemic. Yet the Westminster government did not act.

We are still in the pandemic. So, there is little justification for not now taking even greater steps to protect our health, emergency social care and key employees in ways that will not hinder or disrupt their work. This irony is not recognised by our Government. Good health and safety practices will safeguard these health workers who safeguard the public who safeguard our economy. The three elements are closely intertwined. HSE now states it wants to be ‘flexible and proportionate’ in dealing with COVID-19. Yet the HSE appeared to go missing in inaction for weeks and months when the pandemic started and is still barely visible. It is also difficult to envisage how a proportionate response by HSE to major failings for protecting doctors, nurses and social care workers could have been anything less than rapid interventions requiring immediate health and safety improvements.

Early regulatory interventions in workplaces through inspections, monitoring, advice and support were needed. PPE provision, adequate staffing levels, testing, action on the position of vulnerable workers outside healthcare should all be considered health and safety matters. Ministers, regulators and others should provide details and timetables on PPE provision; ensure proper consultation with workforces on pandemic planning; and update the public, unions and the media regularly on how many health and other workers have been made ill or died from COVID caused or related illnesses. A HSE COVID health and safety phone hotline should operate.

When the pandemic is over, there will need to be a fundamental review of the many COVID-19 failures to protect worker health and safety not just in health and social care settings but in all Scottish workplaces. This should include an examination of the HSE’s and local authority health and safety regulatory roles and functions, and the impact of PH and Health Protection Scotland (HPS) on both public health and occupational health and safety policies in a pandemic. It should, however, go wider and include questions about how workplace health and safety generally is dealt with in Scotland. Unions have been some of the most effective analysts and problem-solvers in the COVID crisis on prevention of workplace illnesses and supply of PPE along with the Hazards Campaign and Hazards magazine. There should be a key role for unions post-pandemic on taking forward Scotland’s economic and social recovery recognising the need for decent working conditions including health and safety and tying in with existing work on just transitions and green new deal approaches relevant to the even bigger public health threat of climate change that is looming.

Andrew Watterson is Emeritus Professor of Health in the Public Health and Population Health Group at the University of Stirling.
Carers amidst the COVID-19 crisis

Helen Glancy reports on her work as a carer in the coronavirus crisis and highlights the persistent problems.

The role of home care is one which is complex, demanding, varied and under-valued. However, since the global Covid-19 pandemic, the world has suddenly realised how dependent society is on this low-paid workforce. At the same time, there is a realisation of the threat the pandemic poses to them, and the role that carers play in caring for the people most vulnerable to it.

I work as a home carer for a local authority in Scotland. It is a job that includes split shifts, lone working and walking distances in all weathers. We are often short staffed and expected to support service users who are older, frailer and more dependent on care than ever before. The pressure to get people out of hospital sooner has led to an increase in the demands on home carers with new tasks added to our role like administering medication, reablement, and dementia care. We are not well-paid. It is rewarding but it can be stressful. However, we are in a whole different ball game now!

The world has been faced with one of the greatest challenges in modern times which has presented a monumental task, particularly for those who are classed as key workers. NHS staff are rightly applauded for the courage and skill they display in working in the frontline of hospital care. Meanwhile, home care workers support service users in their homes. This includes people from across all social sectors with an extensive number of varied needs and medical backgrounds. The challenges and demands for carers are always high but, due to the situation we are in today, this has increased three-fold. Every service user we visit could lead to us picking up the virus. We could infect every service user we visit. In addition to the risk to our physical health, our mental health is also under great pressure and risk.

This pandemic has highlighted the role in which carers play in our society. Due to the severity of this situation the number of support services to other service users has greatly diminished. Roles which could be carried out by others have decreased over the past month as the pandemic worsens and continues to spread. The input from family and friends at this time is extremely limited or in most cases non-existent, due to government restrictions in relation to self-isolation, social distancing and shielding guidance. Whilst we understand these are measures that have to be taken in order to prevent the spread of the disease, this increases the stress experienced by frontline home care workers.

Wardens in sheltered housing complexes are no longer in place to deal with issues of residents, day centres are no longer open, help with laundry and other tasks is no longer available. As a result, this has a significant impact on tasks carried out by carers that are already very time-orientated. There is also the possibility that we have to adopt new care roles that we are not trained for and not prepared for. The increase in safety measures and guidance, coupled with the pressure on the care sector, has had a serious impact on home carers. While nobody doubts the logistics and complexities involved in managing these changes, there are some very basic needs and requirements not being met for those on the frontline.

I speak on behalf of carers like myself who share these views. Albeit this is a challenging time for everyone involved, there has been a lack of proper guidance and cohesion between various parts of the care sector. Carers are fearing for their own health entering different environments several times a day for which they have no control over. It is impossible to create social distance in this role. We have heard of binmen refusing to work if they cannot guarantee they can be two metres apart and yet we are providing personal care with an apron and gloves. The serious lack of protective equipment that is considered essential is worrying for every carer as they leave the comfort of their homes to help those in need. Hearing the First Minister at the daily press conferences saying that there is plenty of PPE when our managers are saying they don’t have any to give us, unless someone has symptoms, is infuriating and increases the feeling that no-one cares about the carers.

We are well aware this is proving to be an issue across the whole of the NHS and the care sector. We are learning of the number of doctors and nurses losing their lives as they care for others each day. It is now being reported that care staff are now also dying from Covid. It is a genuinely worrying and concerning time for everybody involved in the care sector.

It is a combination of all these factors accompanied with the uncertainty across the board which has left us with no choice but to speak out and voice our concerns. We are passionate about our work and our roles and want to ensure our service users have the best standard of care they can possibly get. However, it is important to note that we too require some reassurance as we have to consider not only our individual health, but that of our families who we need to return to after each shift.

Helen Glancy is a home carer and UNISON shop steward.

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Stewart Forrest says it should not have taken a crisis to recognise the crucial role of retail workers

When the Coronavirus hit our shores, the shopping public panicked in the aisles of our supermarkets. Suddenly, the world understood the essential role retail workers have in keeping our communities fed, healthy and safe. Finally, Usdaw’s consistent calls for shopworkers to be respected and valued is being heard, but we cannot let this fade when we get past this national crisis. This must lead to lasting fundamental and radical changes to the way society views our lowest paid workers.

#SolidarityWithShopworkers is not just a phrase for a crisis for the issues our members face are not new, but amplified in this emergency situation: low pay and insecure work; violence, threats and abuse at work, along with wider health and safety issues, and retail commercial crisis are at the core of Usdaw campaigns and will continue long into the future.

The Coronavirus crisis has made politicians, the media and public understand how reliant our society is on lower-paid and often undervalued workers. The NHS, social care, our food and pharmaceutical supply chains and essential public services are all propped up by workers on or near minimum wage rates that don’t meet the cost of living. Many are struggling with insecure employment, on zero-hours or short-hours contracts that do not guarantee their weekly wage.

Usdaw’s ongoing #Time for Better Pay campaign calls for these injustices to be addressed. At least £10 per hour now, ending rip-off youth rates, fundamentally reforming the broken Universal Credit system, proper contracts that reflect average hours and banning appalling zero-hours contracts are the least that can be done to reward our essential workers who are making heroic efforts through the Coronavirus emergency.

The Government initially moved swiftly to announce schemes to help businesses and workers, but have been slow on bringing forward the details. Businesses are unclear about the support available and how they are able to access it. And when businesses are uncertain, the load is often carried by the workers. Many furloughed workers are still not clear what their income will be in the coming weeks and months. That uncertainty is an extra burden for those already struggling to make ends meet and can lead them into unsecured and difficult to repay debt. Universal Credit doesn’t provide the crucial support needed, failing in its function as a safety net for those who need it.

Usdaw was already running a high-profile campaign to tackle the crisis on our high streets. The ‘Save our Shops’ campaign highlighted the desperate state of many town centres, how shop closures rip the heart out of our communities and the devastating impact job losses and company restructures have on staff. We not only identified the issues, but put forward solutions in a comprehensive industrial strategy for retail that commands support across the sector including retail analysts and experts.

If any other industry were in such peril there would rightly be a public outcry, but the Government appears deaf to our protests. Its laissez faire attitude to Britain’s largest employment sector means that workers and our communities are left to the whim of the market.

It was bad then and now the retail crisis is far, far more acute. Many of our members in non-essential retail are rightly deeply concerned about whether their companies can survive the Coronavirus emergency and if they’ll keep their jobs. The Government must step in and support these businesses. There needs to be a rebalancing of taxation to end the overwhelming advantage online retailers enjoy. Now more than ever, the Government must bite the bullet and force the off-shore online retailers to pay their fair share of tax in this country.

We have very strong concerns about the safety of staff during the Coronavirus emergency. Too many employers tried to carry on regardless, particularly those anti-union businesses who do not listen to staff and deny them a collective voice. This crisis has absolutely demonstrated the vital role of union health and safety reps, risk assessing workplaces and securing appropriate safety measures. Surely, the time has come for legislation to stop employers from locking out unions and forcing staff to continue to work in unsafe conditions.

We make no excuses for attacks on shopworkers, there are no circumstances where abuse should be a part of the job, but when the Government and employers undervalue retail staff it is inevitable that some of the shopping public show a total lack of respect. The Government continues to refuse to legislate against shopworker assault, despite the appalling scenes of abuse during panic buying and the lockdown restrictions in supermarkets. Perhaps, no surprise from a right-wing Conservative administration, but this yet again shows we need a change of government to get the necessary protections for frontline staff.

In all my years as a union rep and official I have never known a situation that has had such a dramatic impact on Usdaw members in every single workplace across the country. I am always proud of Usdaw reps and members, but I have never been as proud as now. Their response in supporting very worried members through extremely difficult circumstances has been nothing short of incredible.

This crisis is bringing about fundamental changes to the way we live, it’s changing our values and shining a light on the radical changes our society needs. We cannot go back to the bad old ways of undervaluing workers

#SolidarityWithShopworkers

Stewart Forrest is Usdaw’s Scottish Divisional Officer
Out of crisis, opportunity: economics and the environment

Mags Hall argues that the precedents being set can be used to open up a greener and fairer future

There are no silver linings to the coronavirus pandemic. Nature is not ‘healing itself’. We are mourning the loss of our loved ones, our communities, our ways of living. But riding underneath all this, we still must face up to the long-term existential threat of climate breakdown. COP 26 in Glasgow may be postponed, alongside Scotland’s new climate change plan, but this does not change the fact that time is still running out to decarbonise society.

Early on in the pandemic, Scotland’s First Minister told us: ‘Life should not feel normal right now. If your life still feels entirely normal, ask yourself if you’re doing the right things’. Environmentalists have long been making the same argument over our response to the climate emergency.

The challenge in recent years has not been developing solutions to the climate crisis – we know what needs to be done to decarbonise our homes, our transportation, our food systems. The struggle, instead, has been getting governments and wider society to understand the level of crisis we are in, and what an emergency response looks like.

Until now, the collective lack of political will has led governments around the world to adopt a ‘business-as-usual’ approach, with modest greening measures tacked on as an afterthought. It was this attitude that allowed the Scottish Government last year to propose a ‘Climate emergency’ Programme for Government filled with cognitive dissonance, including a freeze on active travel spending whilst continuing with multi-billion pound road building projects, and a modest reforestation programme paid for by global oil giant, Shell.

Warnings from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) that we only have ten years left to make radical changes just were not sinking in. We were unable to imagine or accept the kinds of shifts to our lifestyles and our economies that we needed to make.

2020 must go down as the year that changed. Within days, we quickly learned what an emergency response looks like. We witnessed changes to our lives, our communities and our personal freedoms that none of us have ever experienced before. We can disagree about the details of some of these changes, whether they happened quick enough or according to the right plan. But overnight, things that Governments long told us were impossible suddenly became official policy.

Homeless people were provided accommodation, in apartments and hotels that had been the exclusive preserve of high-paying tourists. Flights around the world were grounded, whilst train companies were taken back into state ownership. The Chancellor himself acknowledged Universal Credit was not enough to live on, and immediately increased it.

The knock-on impact of bringing our economy to a shuddering halt has understandably seen an unprecedented drop in global emissions. Estimates for Europe have ranged between drops of 40% to 60%, whilst traffic volumes in Britain have been down, on average, by 70%. The cleaner air we are all now breathing is reportedly visible from space. Again, once unimaginable changes are now taking place in a matter of weeks.

To be clear, however, the seismic shift we have witnessed must not be seen as a blue-print for addressing the climate crisis. The rate of change and lack of preparation has meant the most vulnerable in society will bear the brunt for many years to come. Despite an unprecedented support package from the Westminster government, capitalist ideology has meant that we have still prioritised landlords over renters, and employers over workers.

The opportunity for addressing the climate crisis, however, lies in what happens next. With the Office of Budget Responsibility (OBR) predicting an economic slump worse than either world wars or the Great Depression, the world is going to need a fiscal rescue package unlike any seen before. Now is the time for a Scottish Green New Deal.

State investment in low-carbon infrastructure and manufacturing has the potential to create hundreds of thousands of jobs in Scotland alone. Fiscal support must boost our emerging sectors, which will provide secure, well paid jobs for the future – industries like wave-turbine technology, decarbonised heat networks, and large-scale reforestation programmes.

Any support packages for the airline industry and oil and gas sector must be conditional on a programme of managed decline. For these already under-taxed sectors, using public money to attempt to restore them to pre-outbreak levels would be both environmentally and morally incomprehensible.

The current restrictions on movement could permanently change how and why we travel. We must look to the patterns of increased walking and cycling in our now-quietened towns and cities, and make lower speed limits, wider pavements and increased pedestrianisation the new normal.

The temporary nationalising of our rail services was a recognition that public transport is a societal good, worth saving when it is not able to turn a profit. We must hold onto and expand that concept, extending public ownership to bus services too.

Earlier this year, the Scottish Greens won a commitment to roll out free bus travel to all under 19s – a fully nationalised public transport system will allow us to explore that further, with the goal of delivering free public transport for all.

And, lastly, the pandemic has show us how precious yet fragile our globalised food system is. Green New Deal funding to shorten and re-localise food chains would have the double impact of increasing food security, whilst cutting associated emissions.

Our generation now knows what an emergency response looks like. We must use that knowledge to build a new world that values the health of our planet and all we call home.

Mags Hall is a political researcher, co-convenor of the Scottish Green Party’s National Council, and a lead candidate for Mid Scotland and Fife in the 2021 Scottish Parliament elections.
On the union frontline in a pandemic
Stephen Smellie recounts the pressures and learning curve to become a health and safety expert

I am not a frontline care worker, nurse or doctor. I am not even a key worker. I am a full-time seconded union branch secretary in a local authority. I have been involved in negotiations, disputes, strikes and political struggles. I work long hours catching up, preparing casework, reading and writing reports. Often when I sit down to relax, I am distracted by a call from a member wanting advice or support. It is a busy and often stressful life.

Nothing however prepares you for a pandemic. As the Coronavirus approached in early 2020, I, along with most people, focussed on other important issues. Though gradually I realised this was a bigger threat than things like Swine Flu and sensed preparations were not quite as detailed as they should be, I still never appreciated just how big this was going to be.

By 14 March people had stopped shaking hands, toilet rolls were hard to come by and the reality that the country was in trouble became clear. Over the next few days, discussions about people preparing to work from home and possible lockdowns developed. Union reps engaged in hurried discussions with managers about what was to happen to services, how quickly we could arrange facilities and resources for home working and what we would do when the schools closed.

Members started calling union offices, not feeling safe coming to work. Hand sanitiser and soap were nowhere to be seen amidst the panic buying. It became clear lots of people were going to die.

Some of our branch officers were now staying home due to underlying health concerns and we closed our branch office to work from home. Once our office phone was diverted onto my mobile, the phone has never stopped as the neighbours couldn’t see the tears rolling down my face as the stress and fears of the days before expressed themselves. There is still a long way to go and there will need to be a reckoning but at the moment it still a long way to go and there will need to be a reckoning but at the moment it is still necessary to focus on supporting those workers in the frontline.

Stephen Smellie is the UNISON Branch Secretary for South Lanarkshire. He is also a member of the editorial committee of the Scottish Left Review.
The coronavirus pandemic has widened what were cracks in our social welfare into yawning chasms. The economic downturn resulting from social distancing and lockdown measures taken to tackle the spread of this virus has worsened an already-dire situation for precarious workers and people living in rented accommodation. The crisis lays bare the harsh reality of a housing system defined by precarity, where so many tenants are just one payslip away from homelessness. And now, for many, those payslips are gone.

Before the pandemic, rents in Scotland’s private housing market were skyrocketing, particularly in urban centres like Glasgow and Edinburgh. A report by the Scottish Government found that average rents for two-bed proper ties in the latter have increased by 46.3%, or more than double the rate of inflation, since 2010. That trend repeats across most of Scotland’s rental market, and successive governments have proven either woefully ineffective in addressing it or to be themselves complicit.

The insupportable pressure on tenants caused by the pandemic is as much a political issue as it is an economic one. As real-term wages have stagnated as a result of over four decades of neoliberalism, people in rented housing are trapped in an impossible situation. Tenants who have been furloughed, lost or risk losing their jobs altogether are by and large the ones already struggling: private renters are more likely to be in precarious and low-paid work than homeowners; they’re more likely to be living paycheque to paycheque, and they’re less likely to have savings. With little or no financial buffer to weather the crisis, the healthcare crisis is made so much worse by their financial precarity. All of this plays out against a backdrop of sustained political attacks on social security: ten years of brutal austerity, Universal Credit benefit reforms, the evaporation of social housing and the erosion of state support to meet the cost of soaring rents, notably in the private sector. The Scottish government has yet to address this honestly or adequately.

While both Holyrood and Westminster government have encouraged tenants to apply for Universal Credit, rolled out a furlough scheme for some workers, and have encouraged landlords to offer rent reductions, these measures amount to mere sticking plasters that don’t go far enough. While Living Rent did successfully secure a six-month eviction ban, there is nonetheless little to ensure that tenants are not crippled by debts or faced with eviction once this six-month ban runs over. In March, the Chancellor announced mortgage lenders are required by law to offer homeowners who need it a three-month mortgage payment ‘holiday’, which has since been extended to landlords. The Scottish Government has said that these payment freezes ‘should’ be passed on to tenants, but without a legal requirement for them to do so, the encouragement is left to landlords’ discretion and, thus, ineffective.

After intense campaigning by Living Rent, the Scottish Government agreed to ban all evictions for six months from 1 April, so that no one will lose their home due to coronavirus. Nevertheless, if a tenant is unable to pay their rent because they cannot go to work, they must still come to an arrangement with their landlord, who can demand payment of arrears when the pandemic is over. In other words, landlords are being offered a safety net while tenants, who may be out of work for months through no fault of their own, are left to fend for themselves. For tenants, this is simply unfeasible and unfair, and demonstrates a wilful ignorance of how renting actually works—our housing system is not a free market between buyers and sellers. People need homes but landlords rarely need rental profits. Both the British and Scottish governments are unequivocally showing themselves to be in the pockets of landlords.

Living Rent continues to fight for tenants living on the knife’s edge. Though social distancing measures have put a pause on the door knocking we rely on for outreaching tenants, local branch organisers and volunteers continue to keep in touch with members by phone and text. Likewise, our Member Defence teams remain available and committed to sharing their expertise, especially around problems that tenants are facing during the pandemic, including negotiating for a rent reduction. We’ve published FAQs with answers for all tenants who are experiencing issues with their landlords and need to know their rights. We’re also scaling up local wins into national demands, with our newest, Hygiene Kills the Virus, campaign building on one Glasgow branch’s success in forcing their social landlord to introduce extra cleaning measures.

But, overall, more needs to be done at the national level. That’s why we’re pushing the Scottish government and housing authorities to act decisively to protect tenants at risk of losing everything as well as working with allies ACORN and London Renters’ Union to coordinate a UK-wide response. We’ve also launched a survey on work and housing conditions under the coronavirus in order to better support our members and strengthen the national case for further government action. But let’s be frank, the housing crisis is about to get infinitely worse and politicians, who all seem to be homeowners or landlords, have no idea what it’s like to struggle to pay rent or negotiate with your landlord. This pandemic has made an already bad situation worse and in order to avoid the worst, tenants themselves will have to force the government into action—and Living Rent will be fighting with everything we’ve got to make sure that happens.

Ben Kritikos is a writer, greengrocer and editor at the independent press, Spaghetti for Brains. For more information about Living Rent, see https://www.livingrent.org/
After COVID-19, there can be no more ‘business as usual’ for our railways

Mick Cash says though there is ‘clear and present’ danger, we have a political opportunity on our hands

I
t goes without saying that the Coronavirus pandemic has been an unprecedented challenge for the rail industry. Throughout this period, the RMT’s absolute priority is protecting our members’ health, safety and livelihoods and we have worked with the Government and train companies to agree emergency working principles for the rail industry.

In April, mainline rail journeys were down by around 95% compared to the year before. However, thousands of frontline rail workers (who like other transport workers have been classified as ‘key workers’ by Government) continue to go to work to ensure that our railways can transport other essential workers and goods.

There are a multitude of employers across the railways, and some good practice has emerged in terms of protecting workers’ safety and livelihoods. However, the responses have not been consistent, and unfortunately many RMT members have reported being put at risk at work, for instance, by being asked to undertake non-essential tasks that risk breaching social distancing or not being provided with adequate PPE. Tragically, a number of transport workers have lost their lives to COVID-19 and there are others unwell with confirmed or suspected COVID-19.

In response to the massive decline in passenger numbers, and hence revenue, the Westminster government transferred all franchised Train Operating Companies (TOCs) onto ‘Emergency Measures Agreements’ whereby all revenue and cost risks are transferred from the company to the Government and the Government instead pays a small fee to the TOCs to run a reduced number of services. The Scottish Government has confirmed that its emergency measures for ScotRail will mirror those of the Westminster government’s approach.

It has been widely reported in the media that the Government had effectively renationalised the railways with this approach. Yet this is not actually the case. In fact, this model - usually referred to as a rail concession - is not new and is already in place in a number of rail operations including London Overground, Merseyrail and Transport for Wales. These rail concessions are operated by the private companies Arriva, Abellio and Serco and Keolis Amey respectively, although the fee paid will be higher than that being doled out during the COVID crisis.

Ultimately, the COVID-19 crisis has exposed the failures of the system caused by fragmentation and privatisation, and has shown, once and for all, why we need a total rethink of how our railways are structured, owned and run.

Even before the COVID-19 outbreak, Britain’s privatised railways were in disarray. The Scottish Government confirmed in December that it would not be extending Abellio’s contract to run the Scot rail franchise past 2022, after the service had been beset by cancellations, delays and disruption. Earlier this year and prior to the outbreak, the Scottish Government announced additional funding for Abellio of around £100m for 2020-21, bringing the total annual funding to around £500m, due to a clause in the franchise agreement which allows for increased subsidy if passenger revenue does not increase as projected. Thus, the company is effectively being rewarded, with massive amounts of public money, for failure.

The long-awaited findings of the Westminster government’s ‘independent’ review of the railways, chaired by the former CEO of British Airways, Keith Williams, originally due in autumn 2019, had already been delayed, and now, of course, have been delayed further due to Coronavirus. If and when Williams’ recommendations are eventually published remains to be seen.

With the support of the rail unions, Labour recently published its vision for the railways in the form of an opposition White Paper. The White Paper set out a plan for a nationally integrated and publicly owned railway. The RMT welcomed the publication of Labour’s plans, which set out in great detail how this railway would function as a guiding mind for the whole railway within a vertically integrated structure. Particularly important was the new single publicly owned railway would employ all rail workers in one company including those in functions such as cleaning and catering which are often outsourced into precarious employment under privatisation. Having a single employer would end the inequality of two-tier workforces, prevent profit leakage from sub-contracting, retain knowledge and expertise within the railway, and create an employment structure with a clear career path. The structure also proposed significant representation for both unions and passengers but also powers for all the four nations.

So, there is a useful discussion to be held over the actual structure and make up of anyway publicly owned railway. But the principles are clear: ending profiteering and delivering a better railway through a single unified organisation that employs all rail workers and gives those workers a powerful voice.

Vitally, a nationally integrated and publicly owned railway would be a stronger position to respond to a national emergency in the future. In this structure, the Government would not have to scramble to establish emergency funding arrangements to prevent numerous private operators from going bust. Rather, it would allow for long-term strategic planning and for contingency measures to be established. It would also provide job security for staff who were all employed directly by a public body.

We are all rightly focusing on defeating Coronavirus and protecting frontline workers. However, there can be no return to a Tory ‘business as usual’ and RMT will continue work with all progressive politicians in Scotland to ensure that key workers receive more than just a thanks and we can build a better Scotland and a better railway for Scotland.

Mick Cash is the General Secretary of the Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union
Now war is declared and battle come down – the coming conflict in the SNP over Salmond’s success

Jim Sillars says it’s going to be nasty and brutish but the independence movement can and must survive

A lex Salmond was cleared of serious sexual charges by a jury of eight women and five men. They saw and heard all the evidence against him, and watched and heard the accusers under cross-examination. In addition, they saw and heard him in the witness box, and similarly with his defence witnesses. Those salient facts should be borne in mind when, as has been attempted, doubts have been expressed about the verdict.

As a result of the jury’s decision, the newspaper headlines had to be shelved. Those documentaries that had been so carefully researched, ready for transmission on TV the night of the trial’s verdict, had to be canned. The Scottish Government Permanent Secretary was comprehensively defeated in her ‘war.’ Those waiting to put the boot into a ‘fallen hero’ had to put it unused back on the ground.

They had reason for all their hopes. Two Scottish judges had, at preliminary hearings, declared as inadmissible evidence of a political conspiracy, when that was the basis of the accused’s defence. Judges get upset when anyone outside the academic and legal profession criticises their judgements, but they are not Gods or infallible. They are paid by the people to serve the people in delivering justice. And, the people are entitled, nay, it is essential, that the people express opposition to their judgements when justice may not have been done.

No one can say that the trial itself was other than fair. But was it the fairest trial that Alex Salmond could have had? Preliminary hearings are held to sort out legal matters when, for example, the judge decides whether evidence is admissible or not. In the Salmond case, unknown to the public, because the press cannot report on the legal arguments, evidence supporting the basis of his defence, that he was the subject of a political conspiracy, was ruled out by the trial judge, and when she was unable to take a second preliminary hearing, ruled out by one junior to her. That was a major impediment in his defence.

Yet, despite the police service devoting substantial resources (a senior officer and 22 others), some 400 interviews in a wide trawl and the Crown Office deciding to prosecute with their best man sent in to nail the accused, there was a collective failure thirteen times to get a conviction.

The trial of Alex Salmond did not produce the outcome so many wanted and had planned for. His QC, Gordon Jackson, handicapped by those judicial decisions on what was admissible, had to resort to euphemism in his final address to the jury – ‘it stinks’ – to signal that conspiracy it was. It is a fair conclusion to say, from the verdicts, that the jury agreed.

As a party, as the electoral wing of the independence movement, that matters. There have been public appeals to Alex Salmond and his camp not to seek revenge and to reach out for reconciliation. The Alex Salmond facing huge legal bills, whose personality has been thrashed and trashed for all the world to see, and whose legacy as the most successful nationalist politician of all time has been tarnished, would have to be the Saint he says he is not, to refrain from writing his book and nailing those who would have happily ruined him, and his wife Moira, and listened with glee as the cell door clanged.

Not being in the Salmond camp, but in the SNP, and having devoted the major part of my political life to the cause of independence, I see a need for a complete clear-out of the highest levels of the party before it is again fit to lead. The cult of personality, the obsessive desire of leaders for complete control of the membership and parliamentarians, the growth of a clique of acolytes, one-person rule, - there has been a rot growing at the heart of this organisation for years. The trial was based on Alex Salmond’s conduct between 2008 and 2014, with Ms A, claiming to have been the first victim. There was allegedly a policy to

Alex Salmond did not emerge from the court proceedings unblemished, to say the least. His character and personality were turned inside out, with all the flaws exposed and the folly of the cult of personality laid bare. His conduct towards female civil servants was deplorable; and while his defence admitted ‘inappropriate’ conduct with them, it did not give an inch to his SNP accusers – ‘fabrication’ was the description of their evidence. Another euphemism.

The criminal trial of Alex Salmond may be over, but the trial of the SNP both at party and parliamentary level is yet to begin. It is unavoidable. There is much talk about a Salmond camp and a Sturgeon camp. From all I have written critically over the years during the ‘rule’ of both, I can claim to be in neither camp. I did not believe Salmond, self-explained as ‘no Saint,’ was guilty of criminality, and saw much of the evidence of the conspiracy before the trial. The book he is writing, with the material he was not allowed to produce at trial, but which has all the authenticity of Scottish government and SNP party documents, will be like a volcano going off underneath some people. Some whose identities I and others know, but cannot name, must tremble at the prospect of what is to come. There could be another police investigation, this time not into Alex Salmond. But it is for other people, who have the evidence complete and in full detail, to decide whether or not to submit a complaint to the police.

For the rest of us, it is the effect of that coming volcanic eruption on the SNP as a party, as the electoral wing of the independence movement, that matters. There have been public appeals to Alex Salmond and his camp not to seek revenge and to reach out for reconciliation. The Alex Salmond facing huge legal bills, whose personality has been thrashed and trashed for all the world to see, and whose legacy as the most successful nationalist politician of all time has been tarnished, would have to be the Saint he says he is not, to refrain from writing his book and nailing those who would have happily ruined him, and his wife Moira, and listened with glee as the cell door clanged.
meetings, was a national teach-in about the referendum, with its big attendance at an educational experiment called the 2014 Scottish independence ballot. That great democratic success, and the problem of how to build on it, has been a long one, often rocky, often dispiriting. The years 1979 to 1988 has been a long one, often rocky, often dispiriting. The independence movement is not just the SNP, but the movement as a whole has much invested in the party as the instrument to achieve democratic success. As the rot is uncovered, the temptation - already being thought of by some - will be to set up something new, untainted, in its place. That might need to be done if the damage to come proves fatal.

I hope not, because it is not easy to replace and fill the electoral space of a long established organisation. I speak from experience of an attempt to do so in the mid- to late 1970s with the Scottish Labour Party. It is better to cleanse a sword than to discard it, in the hope of finding another. But if the sword cannot be cleansed enough ... well ... we shall see. There is enormous strength, and ability, in the independence movement. Whatever direction is taken, it will eventually succeed.

‘Enormous strength and ability’ is not a pious ‘give them hope in dark times’ message. The road to independence has been a long one, often rocky, often dispiriting. The years 1979 to 1988 were dark ones, when the very idea of independence was widely mocked and the SNP dismissed as ‘Tartan Tories’ guilty of letting Margaret Thatcher into government. There were no lottery winners then. We had just one relatively modest bequest to pay for by-elections, and enough from other income for a small number of overworked, loyal staff. But despite the problems, there was a tenacious belief that Scotland could only flourish to its full potential with full sovereignty, and determination to achieve it.

That belief still pertains, but times have changed. That great democratic educational experiment called the 2014 referendum, with its big attendance at meetings, was a national teach-in about our nation, and its result is that today’s independence movement has grown in strength and depth to a degree that cannot be conquered. The resilience that was there in the SNP in those earlier times is there in abundance in the movement today. It will be needed.

What is to come in the wave of revelations denied us in the Alex Salmond trial will gladden unionist hearts. How could we be so misled, the unionist papers will yell from the front pages, and their columnists will have a heap of dirty clothing to poke around in. A tempest of scorn will sweep down on and over on the independence movement, and part of its destructive power will come from within the nationalist ranks as defensive fences are built around the leadership, and that leadership is assailed by those with cause, with some spurred by egos in pursuit of ambition.

But all tempests run their course, whether it be the awesome ones that lash the seas and devastate the land, or the ones that sweep through politics. Calm does return, and that is what the movement should now be preparing for. The consequences of Covid-19 crisis and Brexit will see profound changes in the economic structures, social policies, and politics in Britain, the EU and world economic relations. The old structures and verities will not hold against the shock delivered by the pandemic.

There will be no immediate opportunity to rush for an independence referendum. Time is required to carefully consider the changes that are to come, some swiftly, some in a later time scale. We may have forgotten it, but Britain is due to finally leave the EU on 31 December 2020, and the final deal, too will have to be examined, because it is from the combined (British) single market and customs union from which we shall have to extract Scotland – and that will require a different set of policies to achieve the objective from those set out in 2014.

But all that examination and analysis does not mean a temporary paralysis and no action. A mass demonstration in September would be a show of strength and commitment. But that is not policy. What is required now is to create a single national organisation, with funds, staff, and policy groups – all aiming to put together, and promulgate, the new case now required to build the independence vote to such a level that even a purblind Westminster Government can no longer ignore. If that is so, then rot there is.

Scottish independence
Should Scotland be an independent country? % of 1,039 Scots aged 16+

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Jim Sillars is a former Labour and SNP MP and is currently writing his memoirs.
Sex, lies and Salmond – lots of speculation and insinuation but no video tape

Kenny MacAskill picks through the detritus of the trial of the century and finds some unpalatable truths

The Alex Salmond case was entirely unprecedented. For sure there have been major Scottish criminal trials from Oscar Slater through Lockerbie to numerous recent ones. But despite the notoriety of many and the horror of their crimes, none had the profile of Alex Salmond. But not since Charles Stewart Parnell, in the late nineteenth century, had there been the chance to bring down a major figure in an independence movement and no doubt with it to damage the cause. Moreover, although there had been many high-profile sexual cases especially in England, and a few in Scotland, this was the first post-Harvey Weinstein one.

That was a new and added dimension but one that would be lapped up avidly by a Scottish press corps seeking to enjoy their own revelations, as well as by a British one equally reveling in it, as a movement they feared devoured itself. It was, therefore, the trial of the century and, oh, how some loved it.

It’s hard to see it being repeated as the circumstances are never likely to re-occur, and certainly not in my lifetime. But there can be reflections on it and how it was handled by the media, by the legal system and within Scottish politics. But lessons need learned and the fall-out from it is going to reverberate for some time within the SNP and - as a result - in both the independence movement and Scottish politics as a whole.

Of course, the Salmond case had been a dripping roast for the Scottish media for some time. The leaking to the press from Government sources long before even a civil case commenced had already titillated their fancy. It was a slow burn but still there was enough fact and conjecture to provide endless copy. It must have been a major disappointment for them when Lord Pentland, a former Tory law officer in his earlier years, brought proceedings to a conclusion in January last year.

Then not only was the case abandoned by the Scottish Government, but it’s believed to have been only when their lawyers threatened to withdraw from acting. Their administrative actions that were under judicial review were described by Lord Pentland as ‘unlawful in respect that that they were procedurally unfair’ and ‘tainted with apparent bias’. Given both judicial impartiality and the use of legalese, that’s as damning as it comes.

For many though some good copy came from that, as well as asides with the far from recalcitrant Permanent Secretary. It must have been a disappointment for some though as to what might have been. But that potential bean feast was soon to re-appear. What more could be expected when even the Permanent Secretary was viewing it as a battle lost but part of a wider war that they were intent on not just continuing but winning. So much for an impartial civil service upholding its duty to the wider state and its citizens. With the public pursue down by a handsome sum of £500,000, they decided to gamble some tax payers’ money.

And so, the criminal case appeared providing a bounty never before been seen by the Scottish media. As ever in the Alex Salmond saga, an early heads up seemed given to favoured sources. Or, perhaps, more appropriately those with a special relationship with key figures in the administration, as their ‘fingerprints’ were all over it. These weren’t simply administrative slips and certainly not done - as with Clive Ponting during the Falklands War - for the public interest.

As WhatsApp revelations showed, these were part of the continuation of an orchestrated campaign by senior government and party representatives. And so, it came to be that it morphed from a civil case into a criminal trial. Once again, preceded by a splash in a favoured source, Alex Salmond appeared in court with TV crews clambering for footage.

The media was in its element and it was if all its Xmases had come at once. Far from just regular coverage, there would be minute by minute tweets and the documentary crews were readied. Many programmes were prepared, some stations even having more than one on the go, and all were set to roll. Interviews about the man himself were wanted in the can for the very minute the verdict was delivered. Histories of the man and his downfall, together with that of the cause he embodied were set to roll once the assumed verdict of guilty was delivered.

Some newspapers seemed almost to move from coverage of events to almost participation in a prosecution. How some reporting wasn’t held as being in contempt of court beats me. I’ve seen lawyers brought before Sheriffs for lesser slights than the coverage that seem to compare a man awaiting trial to serious offenders far and wide. A rogue’s gallery even appeared in one with Alex Salmond centre piece. That really was quite disgraceful and as clear a case of contempt as I’ve ever seen.

Strangely enough when the acquittal verdict was delivered by the jury, the cameras rolled on Alex Salmond as he left the court, but the documentaries have still to be shown. Presumably despite being in the can and ready to roll, the ending didn’t find favour with the powers despite the resource expended. That must have been hugely disappointing for some.

But, what of the prosecution itself? It seems that much of it was offered up to Police Scotland on a platter by senior government and SNP sources; a prelude for the head they ultimately wanted to see placed upon it. Not only did they offer the civil case that had failed and been described as illegal, unfair and tainted with bias, they proceeded to seek more. The infamous WhatsApp group was formed as senior government and SNP sources sought offer up, if not conjure up, even more evidence.
Despite all these super sleuths assisting a police investigation before and during it, that seemed never seemed questioned by Police. They seemed to treat it as the Gospel truth rather than evidence that required to be investigated given its source. Nor did they put any constraints upon the resources expended. Despite occurring at a time when that organisation was pleading potential financial ruin, reducing officers and complaining of insufficient resource to do the day job, an enquiry of gargantuan proportions was unleashed.

The country was scoured from top to bottom, hundreds were interviewed. Many, if not most, thoroughly bemused as either contact with Alex Salmond had been minimal or they had no complaints whatsoever. Not just the civil complaints or even his tenure but his entire adult life of over 40 years seemed trawled over. No stone was to be left unturned or so it seemed. But on they pressed almost in tandem with senior police protests about funding and staffing, but who cares they had a job to do.

As a defence agent of 20 years standing and a former Justice Secretary in the Scottish Government, I’ve known major police enquiries but never of such magnitude other than for the most heinous of crimes and dangerous of offenders. Despite all that, what they turned up was pretty flimsy, indeed, and so it was ultimately seen by the jury. Ironically, information that came to their attention of transgressions by others seems to have simply been left or ignored. Sauce for the goose but not the gander. I also had chats along the way with very senior police sources who told me how poor they thought their job to do.

As it was, its requirement meant that the ‘Moorov’ doctrine of similar crimes providing corroboration was needed. Hence even flimsy and even absurd allegations required to be used. That may well have helped sway the jury but the failure to remove corroboration as resolved by Lord Bonomy has come back to haunt some behind that move.

With coronavirus overshadowing everything, both the verdict and the aftermath have been relegated far behind. The poison that had flowed before and even during the trial has continued unabated. Amongst their victims was Gordon Jackson QC whose real ‘crime’ seems to have been to have represented Salmond. Moreover, the manner in which he was brought down seems more than accidental and yet was matched by a few other incidents during the case. It certainly seems that as well as the poison and prejudice of a few, there were other ‘dark forces’ operating.

So, where does that leave us? Time will tell. But a few documentaries will roll albeit hastily rewriting not just the ending but some of the script. The (Scottish) Parliamentary Inquiry will be illuminating and much more will come to light. Whether through committee investigations or other sources, those in Government and other agencies seeking to stem information flow have as much chance of success as King Canute. What started as an investigation into the abuse of power by one man’s has moved on. Now it encompasses actions by other powerful figures and organisations with their use and, perhaps, abuse of power. Rightly so, but thankfully we’ll never see its likes again.

Kenny MacAskill is the SNP MP for East Lothian. Previously, he was a SNP MSP from 1999 to 2016.
Does the end of Corbyn mean the end of Corbynism?

How has Labour’s membership shifted so quickly to the right and picked Keir Starmer to replace Jeremy Corbyn as leader? Until recently an outside observer would have thought that the left had a solid hold on the party. Three hundred and fifty thousand new members joined between 2015 and 2018. It was assumed that because they were attracted by Corbyn’s leadership campaigns they were on the left.

The EU referendum took place less than a year after Corbyn became leader. The immediate reaction of the majority of Labour MPs was to accept the outcome and the discussion on the left was around how to achieve a ‘Progressive Brexit’. This lasted 24 hours before the carefully orchestrated coup was launched to try to force Corbyn to resign. After he was re-elected in 2016, some of the participants in the coup came back into the shadow cabinet including Keir Starmer.

As we now know the campaign to bring Corbyn down did not end there. It continued throughout the 2017 General Election campaign and involved not only MPs but also, apparently, party staff. All but his most churlish critics admitted that Corbyn had a good campaign and the party’s membership continued to grow.

One thing that differentiated some of the newer members from the traditional Labour left was their reluctance to accept the outcome of the EU referendum. Even remain voting party members usually had a degree of scepticism about the EU and generally supported ‘remain and reform’. The EU’s neo-liberalism, its treatment of Greece and its proposed trade deal with the US were widely condemned. Some of the newer members, however, seemed to have fewer concerns and many claimed to positively ‘love’ the EU.

Corbyn’s attraction to new members appeared less to do with his class-based economic analysis and more about his internationalism, anti-war and environmentalist credentials.

Keir Starmer was popular with this group and succeeded in keeping the second referendum as an option right up until the 2019 election. In the event this probably cost Labour ‘red wall’ seats at the election, but it appealed to many on the traditional right of the party and a good number of the new, presumed left, members.

Corbyn and McDonnell, however, had moved politics to the left and in order to win, Starmer had to stick with the Corbyn manifesto. His campaign pledges included increasing income tax for top earners and reversing the cut in corporation tax; abolishing Universal Credit and university tuition fees; endorsing the Green New Deal; ending the privatisation in the NHS; supporting common ownership of rail, mail, energy and water; and standing up for union rights.

On devolution, he supports a federal system to devolve powers, regional investment banks and regional industrial strategy, abolishing the House of Lords and replacing it with an elected chamber of regions and nations.

While his manifesto may be progressive, some of the appointments to his team are quite the opposite. We must hope that those who supported him will now hold him to these pledges.

Jackie Baillie’s election as Deputy Leader of the Scottish Party is in some ways more concerning. If she and Ian Murray have their way, Labour will go into May’s election competing with the Tories for the unionist vote, thereby, ensuring a majority in Parliament for independence.

We know that by next May the economy will be worse than it is now. Scotland is already starting from a weak position. It has less investment, lower levels of research and development and lower productivity than much of the rest of Britain.

The SNP’s Sustainable Growth Commission will look even less sustainable than when it was adopted last year. The report’s planned 10 years of austerity will have to be stretched indefinitely. Assuming it is Sturgeon leading the SNP into an election, it is hard to imagine she will want to base her campaign on a second referendum to be held during the worst financial crisis in decades. But if she shies away from a referendum, she will upset a very vocal wing of her party.

If Scottish Labour is to have any impact in next May’s election, it must fight the election with a radical agenda. It has firstly to acknowledge that the Scottish Parliament under all leaders has been weak and timid and failed to be the ‘workers’ parliament’ that the early proponents wanted.

It must have policies for redistribution within Scotland as well as demanding redistribution throughout Britain. It must show that it would use the powers the Parliament already has to democratis our economy through public ownership, fair procurement practices and democratically accountable national investment. Finally, it must show that it is possible to have both subsidiarity and solidarity. Powers can be devolved to the most appropriate level for accountability while building co-operation and solidarity rather than competition and rivalry. Even in advance of any constitutional change, it should co-operate with English local authorities and the other Assemblies to exert their combined power to challenge the Tory Government.

Richard Leonard should fight this election on the basis that the only way back from this crisis is to have a Scottish People’s Parliament ready to take radical action to rebalance our economy in favour of working people and their families. A People’s Parliament that puts need before profit and that puts people before flags and is prepared to fight for it. We will need this more than ever in the years to come.

Pauline Bryan is a Labour peer in the House of Lords and leading member of the Red Paper Collective (http://redpaper.net/) and the Campaign for Socialism (http://www.campaignforsocialism.org.uk/)
Near or far? What are the chances of another Scottish independence referendum?

As Sturgeon accepted there’ll be no 2020 indyref2, Joe Middleton assesses the complicated terrain

Brexit has happened and Britain has left the European Union dragging Scotland along with it, despite our overwhelming vote to remain. We still do not know what this will actually mean economically but it does mean that circumstances have changed for Scotland with regard to the British union.

In 2014, as well as in the unmet promises of the infamous ‘Vow’, it was explicitly claimed than only a ‘no’ vote would protect Scotland’s place in the European Union. The SNP stood on an election promise at the last Scottish Parliament elections that if this specific change in circumstances should happen then the public should have another vote on independence. The democratic deficit also continues where Scotland gets Tory governments which we didn’t vote for and which we have, in fact, rejected electorally for well over 60 years.

The First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, presented an update on ‘indyref2’ on 31 January 2020 where she said she still hoped for an independence referendum this year. She also said she would invite all Scotland’s MPs, MSPs and MEPs to ‘come together to endorse a modern Claim of Right for Scotland through a new Constitutional Convention’. She also said ‘a ‘New Scotland’ series of papers will seek to provide the information and answers people want’ on independence.

Reactions to this were mixed on social media. Some said that we should continue to trust the First Minister but others were disappointed that she had not set the date for a referendum whether the Westminster Government was in agreement or not. As Nicola Sturgeon outlined in her statement, the SNP’s preferred route is another fully legal referendum as was agreed with the British Government in the Edinburgh Agreement which led to the 2014 referendum. The problem with this, however, is what happens when Boris Johnson says no to this proposal? And, he did.

Some want the Scottish Government to hold a consultative referendum without seeking permission from the British Government. This is an option which may or may not be within the existing powers of the Scottish Parliament. The First Minister did not rule this out completely but said it would be open to legal challenge. It could also be affected if the unionists organised a boycott. While this might lead to a stronger pro-independence vote, it might also leave it without legitimacy on a low turnout and the British Government would almost certainly refuse to accept the result.

Others would prefer the Scottish Government to just announce a unilateral declaration of independence (UDI) right now but without a pro-independence result in a referendum to pre-empt such a course then such an action would be open to international ridicule. Yet others would like us to go back to the proposal that a majority of MPs or MSPs is enough for independence negotiations to begin.

Unfortunately, that ship has sailed some time ago. Under first-past-the-post (FPTP), a majority of seats can be won without a majority of the vote so election results do not provide a definitive outcome.

The FPTP system of Westminster elections in 2019 gave the SNP 80% of the seats, a thumping majority and a very clear win but unfortunately this does not show majority support for leaving Britain. The SNP got 45% of the vote while the unionists combined got 53.2% support, not that far off the 55% result of the 2014 indyref.

The fact is that the people of Scotland requires to show majority support for independence and this can only be done with a democratic referendum. Once the SNP decided that a referendum was the appropriate avenue for achieving independence, we cannot say in retrospect that this was the wrong thing to do just because the vote did not go our way in 2014. A referendum with a successful outcome is the only way our cause will achieve international legitimacy.

If we held a referendum (either one with agreement with the British Government or that had been decided in the courts was legal) and then the British Government refused to accept that result then a unilateral declaration of independence (UDI) might come into play but it is recognised by most people as an option of last resort.

Present opinion polls show just over 50% support for independence. While this is encouraging, it is still within the margin of error for opinion polling of +/-3% so therefore it is difficult to prove that a definite majority support independence yet.

Independence supporters believe that in a campaign those numbers would solidify and given that the 2014 indyref started on a lower percentage before reaching 45%, they think that in a second independence referendum ‘yes’ would likely win. Given the current numbers, this seems possible which may well be why Westminster is currently saying it won’t support another indyref, because they think it will be lost.
Ultimately, however, the Westminster government only survives because it can point to the fact that a lot of people still support the union. The unionist parties have a right (much as we may despise it) to support foreign governance of Scotland and campaign against independence but there is a difference between saying ‘no’ to independence and saying ‘no’ to having a choice on independence.

There is already enormous grassroots support for independence - as seen by the huge AUOB (All Under One Banner) marches and which has no equivalent amongst the unionists other than a handful of idiots (the so called ‘Force for Good’ who protest at every march and are led by a holocaust denier) or an occasional bigoted Orange march.

There has also been an interesting ‘max the Yes’ strategy outlined for the next Scottish elections. It seeks to gain an even larger pro-independence majority in 2021. The theory behind this is that the large numbers of SNP votes on the list do not equate to many list MSPs. Some have advocated that people should use their vote for another pro-independence party to get more seats in the Scottish parliament. This could potentially work if enough SNP voters adopted it (for a credible party such as the Greens) but it is unlikely to be supported by the SNP who rightly see the list vote as an insurance policy against any potential reverse at the polls. The lurid trial of Alex Salmone probably seemed like a gift from God for British unionists but they will have been disappointed when he has now emerged victorious and cleared of all allegations.

As I write this, I have begun working from home. The coronavirus pandemic has moved fast over the last few weeks from major sporting events being cancelled to shops and pubs being closed to the current lockdown with the public restricted to their homes and virtually under house arrest. We obviously don’t know how this will play out politically with the public. Nicola Sturgeon has remained in step with the British Government on the various public health escalations, probably sensibly as we do share an island.

The unionists still claim that the 2014 indyref was a ‘once in a generation event’ and the result must be respected and that, therefore, there is no requirement for indyref2 and even that Nicola Sturgeon will be long dead before another independence referendum will be held. This position may make sense in their own minds but it certainly does not appeal to the people of Scotland which is why the SNP continues to advance while the unionists continue to decline.

The First Minister is well aware of this and is calculating that public support will continue to build behind the SNP’s position with the party winning ever more emphatic election victories. The unionists are likely to be all but wiped out again in the 2021 Scottish Parliament elections at which point Westminster will no doubt again say ‘no’. However, all the time the support for ‘yes’ will be building up and we will start to see support for a second indyref and also support for actual independence growing ever higher.

The claim of right circa 1989 following on from the Declaration of Arbroath in 1320 has emphasised that the system of government in Scotland should be decided by the people of Scotland and them alone. All the parties in Scotland (except the Conservatives) accepted this point in 1989 pre-devolution and it still holds today.

The first cracks in the unionist wall are now appearing with some Labour MSPs saying that another independence referendum should be held. There is also a pro-independence group within the party called ‘Labour for independence’. By moving onto this platform, i.e., that the people have the right to choose (whether or not you support independence), the SNP is potentially able to gather a larger group of the electorate behind it than just the definite pro-independence supporters.

The Conservative Government with its obvious contempt for Scotland and Scottish MPs - the latest example was over the Scottish Government’s asylum proposals which were swiftly binned - is making the case for independence more obvious every day. The SNP is on the right side of the argument. That the people of Scotland should decide their own future is, ultimately, a much stronger and more popular message than ‘Westminster says ‘no’ to any democracy for Scots’.

When it becomes obvious to everyone that the union is no longer at all popular (and we are not quite there yet unfortunately) then another referendum will need to be held. The longer Westminster waits, the more likely it is to lose it when it happens. It knows this as well so the only question is: who will blink first? The First Minister can afford to wait as long as the SNP is rising in the polls and the case is being made for a better future under independence. The ‘New Scotland’ series of papers announced by the First Minister will help make that case.

We know that Britain is exploiting and draining Scotland’s wealth so we can’t wait forever but we must also be aware that political events are moving in the right direction. Brexit is already and will continue to be unpopular, and a ‘no deal’ Brexit will be even worse. Scotland can escape the drowning and dying British project and in Nicola Sturgeon we have a globally respected leader who can point us towards our freedom. I understand that many of my fellow Scottish nationalists - and by that, I mean those who support normal nation status for Scotland - are impatient for action but the SNP and the wider independence movement have never been in a stronger position and our freedom is going to come very soon.

Joe Middleton is a member of the Scottish National Party and the Celtic League
Bringing up the Bairns O’ Adam – the STUC, Scotland and social justice

Grahame Smith reflects on some tumultuous times as he bows out from leading the STUC

Writing a reflection over thirty-four years working at an institution such as the Scottish Trade Unions Congress (STUC), including fourteen as its the General Secretary, is a significant challenge. It is a task I embark on with a high degree of reticence. Having considered the STUC’s role, impact, successes and failures, constantly over the past 34 years, I have little desire to rake over them now nor to engage in an exercise that could be viewed by some as one of self-justification, of displaying selective (or genuine) memory loss, or of attempting to rewrite history. There are plenty of STUC observers around with their own reflections of this period, who will be only too happy to pick apart anything I commit to paper. The following should, therefore, be read with all of that in mind.

What I would offer is that, throughout my time at the STUC, my overarching objective has been to ensure that my contribution has been true to the purpose of the STUC: ‘to co-ordinate, develop and articulate the views and policies of the trade union movement in Scotland reflecting the aspirations of trade unionists as workers and citizens’, and to support its General Council to the best of my abilities, as it has striven to advance the interests of the working class. It is for others to judge how effectively in this respect I have undertaken the various roles I have had the privilege to hold.

Of course, how the General Council, and the STUC Secretariat, has sought to fulfill the purpose of the STUC has been conditioned by the changing political, economic and industrial relations context in which it operated in this period.

More than two decades of Tory government; the deindustrialisation of the Scottish economy; the legislative attack on unions; the massive decline in union membership and collective bargaining; a decade of ‘new’ Labour government; the re-establishment of the Scottish Parliament; the ascension of the SNP; the referendum on independence; the increasing prominence of constitutional and identity politics and much, much more, have all been significant in shaping the context in which the STUC has operated.

For me, the hypothesis offered by Keith Aitken in his history of the STUC, called ‘The Bairns O’ Adam’ and published in 1997, is a helpful frame of reference in which to place my reflections on the past three decades. Keith argues that, from its inception, the STUC has been much more significant politically than industrially, that it has often played an influential, distinctive and often courageous role in shaping public policy and debate, but relatively rarely has affecting the outcome of industrial issues. He notes that this view is not popular amongst trade unionists. Context, of course is important.

However, certainly in relation to my time at the STUC, I consider this a rather false distinction, as are the ones often made between the STUC’s policy and political engagement role as opposed to its wider role in campaigning or developing workplace organisation. They are and have never been an either/or. They are mutually reinforcing.

The STUC doesn’t recruit and organise workers or collectively bargain on their behalf. Indeed, its affiliates are explicitly in their view that its activity must not cut-across established collective bargaining arrangements. Similarly, the STUC has no locus in instigating industrial disputes. However, creating an environment that supports unions in growing their membership and extending collective bargaining and winning disputes when they are unavoidable is its core business.

What happens in workplaces, the power relationships between workers and employers, and how they play out, is and has always been the central focus of the STUC. In that sense, the STUC has always had a defining class dimension. There has not been a major industrial dispute in my time, indeed throughout its history, in which the STUC had not played an important role.

Whether its coordinating movement solidarity and financial assistance; organising civic society support or public demonstrations; securing the required political interventions; and in more cases that would be apparent, conducting behind the scenes brokering, the STUC’s role has been significant.

One of my earliest tasks as an Assistant Secretary was to coordinate the STUC’s support for, and to broker the resolution of, a major dispute over NHS privatisation.

There have been few if any major industrial job losses and closures where the STUC has not played a role. I and my colleagues have served on more Task Forces, established in response to the threat to jobs in companies across various manufacturing sub-sectors and beyond, than I care to remember.

Many were instigated by the STUC. The political and community mobilisations that accompany these events has relied on the STUC to varying degrees.

The focus of the STUC’s policy development and political engagement activity has a direct workplace focus. It has been an overriding objective to place what happens in workplaces, the importance of unions and the advancement of workers’ class interests, at the heart of the public policy debate.

The development of the two-tier workforce protocol governing PFI/PPP projects; the Fair Employment Standard for the Scottish public sector; the Staff Governance Standards for the Scottish NHS and the college sector; and the Guidance on Good Employment Practice, agreed with the Federation of Small Business, are all examples of initiatives that paved the way for more recent achievements.

The Working Together Review; the Fair Work Convention and its Fair Work Framework; the current Scottish Government’s economic strategy,
Remembering Rodney Bickerstaffe

Bob Thomson recalls the life and work of ‘Bick’ following the launch of a website about his life and work

‘The true basis for any caring society must be public services provided from the public purse, staffed by men and women properly trained and decently paid.’ Rodney Bickerstaffe

This website - https://rodneybickerstaffe.org.uk/ - celebrates the life and legacy of inspirational union and labour movement leader, Rodney ‘Bick’ Bickerstaffe (6 April 1945 to 3 October 2017) and shares information and memories of him and his major contribution to improving the lives of working people. Rodney spoke of his most significant achievements being the winning of a statutory minimum wage (in 1998) and the creation of public service union UNISON from a merger of COHSE, NALGO and NUPE in 1993. But as you will see from this site, he was instrumental in much, much more at home and internationally. The site is the creation of colleagues who worked closely with him over many years and campaigns. It has sections outlining his biography, his speeches and writings on the campaigns/causes to which he was dedicated and includes a collection of photos and video clips.

Always spectacled and with a resplendent quiff, he was a popular and highly visible union leader, calling for better rights and fairer treatment for staff working in public services and those transferred to the private sector through national and local privatisations. He was a formidable orator with an infectious sense of humour. He became an organiser for NUPE in 1966 in Yorkshire, rising through the ranks to be divisional officer of the northern division. He then became national officer responsible for members working in local government, universities and the water industry. During the 1978–1979 ‘Winter of Discontent’, he was particularly known for his militancy on behalf of government workers. In 1981, he was appointed NUPE general secretary.

On his retirement in 2001, he succeeded Jack Jones as president of the National Pensioners’ Convention. He stood down in 2005 to focus upon his international commitments. He was a founding Trustee of the International Brigade Memorial Trust and served in that capacity until 2012, when he became one of its patrons. He was President of War on Want, a patron of the Palestine Solidarity Campaign and a past president of the Labour Campaign for Travellers’ Rights. He also chaired the Ken Gill Memorial Fund, a non-charitable trust established to commemorate his late friend, union leader and communist, Ken Gill.

I was a colleague of Rodney for over 40 years. He was an inspirational leader and friend whose humanity shone like a bright star. This site will be of interest to not just members and ex-members of UNISON and NUPE but to all in the labour movement and will spur memories in many.

Bob Thomson was Scottish National Officer of the National Union of Public Employees (NUPE) and then Associate Scottish Secretary of UNISON. He is a member of the editorial committee of Scottish Left Review.
Scottish Labour must take its head out of the sand

Neil Findlay proposes a way forward for Scottish Labour on its constitutional crisis

Labour cannot ignore or wish away constitutional realities a second longer. Issues of democracy, accountability, independence, devolution and regional and national identity are - whether we like it or not - the issues that dominate the Scottish and increasingly, the British, political landscape. If we look at governance across Britain, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have their Parliament or Assembly, there is the Greater London Authority, metro mayors, county councils, district councils, unitary authorities, metropolitan districts, London boroughs and parish councils, not to mention the Houses of Commons, the Lords and previously the European Parliament. This myriad of different levels of government, each with different powers and responsibilities governed by politicians elected under different voting systems (save the Lords) is a dog’s breakfast. If we are going to see the regions of England gain the powers to develop their regional economies (retaining the necessary UK-wide fiscal redistribution), build their own public services to meet local needs and enhance and promote their distinct regional cultures and identities, then we need not just constitutional reform but also local government reform in England.

Whilst some regions have a natural and distinct geographical, political and/or cultural coherence, others are maybe less so. Yet what they do have in common is that in every corner of Britain, people are proud of the place they call home and have a desire to make life better for all their fellow citizens. But they need the tools to do so. Labour has talked a lot about federalism: the talking needs to end and we must see action with have a credible plan so that when in government it will, once and for all be delivered.

I am not arguing for another tier of local governance but a need to reform local government in England and the wider British state to give the nations and regions of it the powers needed with a major programme of democratic reform — no ifs, no buts. Democracy, devolution and subsidiarity should be the driving principles with powerful regional and national governments able to build strong, vibrant, regional and national sustainable communities within a democratised political system where each level of government has clear established and legally binding rights and responsibilities that cannot be taken away at anybody’s whim.

The basic principle on which this should be built is that all powers be devolved to the lowest possible level unless there is a logical and overwhelming reason not to do so. Let’s take two examples. First, drugs. Scotland has the worst rate of drugs death in Europe — therefore all policy headings related to drugs including the misuse of drugs act should be fully devolved to Scotland to address the crisis here. Why would we not do this? Scotland, Wales, Merseyside and every other English region should equally be able to develop policies to meet their local needs, pressures and circumstances. Second, borders. We live in a small island nation with a well-developed internal single trading market and free movement of people within our border. This should remain reserved at a UK level since it makes little sense to create barriers within such a small piece of land. We can, of course, have flexibility to meet national and regional needs but this would remain within an overall immigration policy.

These are just two examples but if we systematically work through all powers then we can see the natural level of government for those powers to rest. There will be debates and disagreement about where a minority of powers should lie.

I make these points to set out a longer-term objective for democratic reform of the British state but here in Scotland we cannot wait until the rest catch up. We need a positive, coherent, practical package of reforms that we can put to the people now — at present we are not even on the pitch, never mind in the game. On this issue Labour has been lazy, curmudgeonly and out of touch.

I have long argued that we need a third option on any future constitutional referendum — one that is not the status quo or independence. That option should be based on the maximum practical and beneficial devolution of powers to the most appropriate level — subsidiarity as it used to be called. This option isn’t a cop out. It is the most logical, practical and beneficial proposal for Scotland’ long term economic, social and political stability and well-being.

In addition to this, we should accept that once we know the outcome of Brexit and if there is a Scottish parliamentary majority for a referendum then there should be one. Indeed, if Labour has a credible, coherent plan to put to the people then we should positively support that referendum and participate in it arguing for this ‘Devo Max’ or ‘Home Rule’ - these are not titles I like but will work with for now - to be on the ballot paper as a third option.

Labour must play an active and positive role; we cannot be sour, passive bystanders. Further, I would argue that if that referendum delivers a result that is not the status quo then any new constitutional arrangement negotiated thereafter must be put back to the people of Scotland so they have the final say on accepting or rejecting that change. This is a positive and optimistic path for Labour to follow. It sees us as participants bringing something new and workable to table. Let’s end the stalemate and move on constructively with a real offer to the Scottish people.

Neil Findlay is a Lothians Labour List MSP

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Can lefties like Wagner?

Graeme Arnott previews his granddaughters’ forthcoming production of her great-grandfather’s opera ‘Lohengrin’.

It’s August 1876 and Nuremberg’s hotels are full to bursting with Wagnerians attending the first Bayreuth festival. Unable to obtain a room, Marx ends up spending an uncomfortable night on a railway station bench. Aggrieved, he castigates Richard Wagner as nothing but a bourgeois state composer.

Fair or unfair as criticism, it’s hardly the worst that has, or could be said, about the controversial composer. For the Adorno of the 1930s, Wagner and his works are always guilty of stirring up the age-old German hatred of the Jew. Indeed, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to understand the ideology of the Third Reich without citing Wagner. Somewhat wryly Alain Badiou observed that Wagner bears an appalling anathema from both the majority of the pro-Palestinian, European left and the government of the state of Israel.

Recently though there have been a number of creditable entreaties for a communist rehabilitation of Wagner. Žižek for one, whilst by no means denying Adorno’s central thesis, that Wagner’s anti-Semitism was not an idiosyncrasy but a feature inscribed into the very artistic texture of his work, has called for a violent gesture of re-appropriation that would necessitate nothing less than a putting aside of a hollow academicism that searches for proto-Nazi elements in Wagner’s operas.

Lohengrin was composed between 1845-1848 when Wagner worked as Kapellmeister at the Royal Dresden court. With its sentimental shimmers and sound ideal of masculine rectitude, it has certain appeal to understand the ideology of the Third Reich without citing Wagner. Somewhat wryly Alain Badiou observed that Wagner bears an appalling anathema from both the majority of the pro-Palestinian, European left and the government of the state of Israel.

Lohengrin was to be performed in Budapest, interpreted by Katharina Wagner, in a previous production of Lohengrin in Budapest, interpreted the action as taking place during an election campaign. Staging Lohengrin in Catalonia, where the forbidden question of independence has already been asked, provides this production with more than just piquant significance. Scottish Opera, however, has never staged Lohengrin; and it is surely now time for them to do so. It’s time to put the forbidden question front and centre on the Scottish stage.

Katharina Wagner’s production of Lohengrin was to be performed at the Gran Teatre del Liceu in Barcelona from 19 March to 5 April (https://www.liceubarcelona.cat/ca/temporada-2019-2020/opera/lohengrin). It has been cancelled and will be rescheduled.

Graeme Arnott is a member of the Wagner Society of Scotland. A fully referenced version of this article is available online. https://wagnerscotland.net/
Shutting down and switching off Silicon Valley

Wendy Liu’s ‘Abolish Silicon Valley: How to Liberate Technology from Capitalism (Repeater Books, 2020, £10.99) is an almost diary-like account of a young computer programmer’s slow disillusionment with the tech industry. This interview, conducted by Aidan Beatty, took place in early February 2020. It was edited down for reasons of space.

AB: You say early in your book, that the point of abolishing Silicon Valley is to build something better in its place. What would that better thing be?

WL: Part of the reason I thought it was necessary to write this book is because the mythology around the tech industry is so pervasive. It’s presumed that the way the tech industry is now is the best possible way that technology could be developed. And that presupposes a certain set of assumptions about the way the world works, about capitalism, about the distribution of wealth.

I want to challenge that. I brought up the idea of abolishing Silicon Valley in order to frame a radically different way of seeing the world, one in which wealth is distributed much more equally, power is dispersed, and technology is built for the benefit of everyone. And so, when I say I want to build something better in its place, I’m not just saying that the technology itself will look different – I’m saying that the world will look different. The tech industry will be downstream of that. The industry as it exists now is not just a microcosm, separate from the rest of the world; it developed in the way it did because of how the rest of the world is structured. So, I don’t think we can just change how Silicon Valley works. I think Silicon Valley will change as a result of broader political and economic changes.

What will that look like and feel like? It will mean no more billionaires. It will mean more worker co-ops, more unions. It will mean fewer for-profit enterprises that are run undemocratically. It will mean much less wealth disparity. None of this is specific to the tech industry; what I identify as problems in the tech industry all stem from that larger problem: capitalism. In order to talk about a better tech industry, I think we have to talk about a world in which capitalism has been radically changed or maybe abolished altogether, if we can even imagine what that will look like.

AB: You talk at one point about the question of unions in Silicon Valley.

WL: A lot of the people in positions of power in the tech industry are openly hostile to unions, or act as if unions are archaic traditions that have no relevance in the tech industry. In the last couple of years, there’s been more talk from people working in the tech industry, both those in service roles and the white-collar workers, saying, ‘Our work is not just an escape from the type of labour issues people have had in the past; we have our own issues, and we would like to be able to collectively bargain as workers using the models and tactics that have been pioneered by the union movement over the last century.’

AB: How does the unionization of the likes of Google link up with unionization elsewhere?

WL: Part of the problem here is that a lot of the white-collar workers at Google don’t see their work as the same kind of work that has driven people to unionize in the past. There is this idea that the (often coveted) work in the tech industry is a whole new breed of work. This growing union movement is pushing back against that.

As the tech industry gets bigger and grows more and more bureaucratic, more concerned about profit, I think there are going to be more parallels between these different types of work. For example, take the case of Uber, which I talk about in the book. On the one hand, you have Uber drivers who are very much not employees, and thus don’t get any benefits. On the other hand, you have Uber’s full-time employees – engineers, designers, product managers, people like that. Right now, it’s very easy to say those are different classes of people.

But Uber is not profitable. How are they going to get profitable? They’re going to have to cut costs. They’ve already announced huge layoffs among full-time employees. So full-time workers who probably thought their jobs were safe are also facing the same problems – they’re also the casualties of capital’s need to cut costs by whatever means necessary. And capital doesn’t really care about individuals. For any individual worker, their value to capital is partly out of their control – it comes down to whether the corporation finds their work valuable. Eventually, they’re going to find that they have more to gain by organizing collectively with their fellow workers.

I think that in the long run, the material conditions in the industry are going to change, and through that, people are going to (hopefully) build solidarity. At the same time, it’s difficult because in the tech industry (especially within programming roles) there is this pervasive mythology and almost Ayn Randian idea that you – an individual – are solely responsible for your success. So, if you get laid off, if you’re not doing well in your career, it’s all your fault. You’re just inferior and you have to get better on your own. I think that’ll be difficult to break down.

AB: Related to how pervasive this ideology is in Silicon Valley, could you tell us what you think the political scene was like there during the presidential election in 2016?

Part of the reason I thought it was difficult to break down is because of the way the mythology around the tech industry is so pervasive. It’s presumed that the way the world works, about capitalism, about the distribution of wealth is specific to the tech industry; what I identify as problems in the tech industry all stem from that larger problem: capitalism. In order to talk about a better tech industry, I think we have to talk about a world in which capitalism has been radically changed or maybe abolished altogether, if we can even imagine what that will look like.

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WL: It’s a complicated topic because the American conservative establishment sees Silicon Valley as a bastion of leftist/liberal ideas. And it’s not really like that. I would say on social issues, the industry is mostly quite progressive, but on economic issues, that really depends on who you’re asking. Because if you ask venture capitalists or founders of companies, most are very pro-free market and laissez-faire in their economics. They probably don’t like the idea of a wealth tax or want more government intervention. They believe entrepreneurship is the driving engine of creativity.

If you ask the people who are working as employees on the front lines, then the picture changes, though it depends who you ask. If you ask someone who is making six or seven figures as a software engineer, who has only ever seen their net worth increase, then they have a particular political view that is largely the product of their own material circumstances. If you ask someone who is a coding bootcamp graduate who has had to work service jobs to be able to stay in the area, they will probably have different political views.

In the 2016 primary, Sanders did actually get quite a bit of support from tech workers in Silicon Valley, but I would say overwhelmingly that the luminaries of the industry went for Hillary Clinton. Some of them went for Trump.

AB: That mythology of being really progressive does seem to be cut across by the common perception that Silicon Valley is very white, very male.

WL: In 2013 or 2014 was when the tech industry started talking about diversity in a quantitative way – when the large tech companies started releasing diversity numbers for the first time. Before this, everyone knew that software engineering roles were predominantly held by white men, but no one had the exact numbers.

And when the numbers came out, it revealed that something like 16% of the engineering jobs for Facebook were held by women. Google and Apple and other companies were pretty similar.

Even before these numbers came out, women, and especially women of colour, had been speaking out about the industry’s lack of diversity, but their voices were mostly ignored. But when the numbers came out, people couldn’t deny it anymore. The conversation got to the point where the people in charge had to start making excuses for why it was this way. They loved to claim that tech was meritocratic – the tech industry is a place where it doesn’t matter where you come from or who you are. As long as you’re good at what you do, then you’ll get noticed, you’ll get rewarded. It’s a fair distribution of resources.

When the numbers came out, these people were basically confronted with several options. One option was to say that, ‘Maybe the industry inherits the biases of the rest of the world.’ But most chose to instead talk about how women had to be more confident, how women don’t like coding. They came up with reasons to abdicate responsibility.

AB: Would you make any predictions as to how people there will vote in the 2020 presidential elections?

WL: There are few people in the industry who are vocal Trump supporters. I know people who like Elizabeth Warren. A lot of people like Bernie Sanders – probably more than you’d expect. It’s a mixed bag. It varies more if you look at it in terms of people’s material backgrounds. If you ask the people who are making a lot of money what candidates they support, they’re probably more likely to support status quo candidates. If you ask people who are service workers or who have less advantageous backgrounds, they’re more likely to be pro-Sanders or pro-Warren. It’s hard to say exactly, but I think that the number of people who are wealthy enough to actually want the status quo is vanishingly small. They are such a tiny number of people, but they’re very, very loud.

AB: Would you characterize Silicon Valley as a cult?

WL: Silicon Valley has this particular mythology surrounding it, and it’s resistant to criticism in a way that definitely feels cult-like, but I don’t know if it’s any more cultish than other industries that have had this much power in the past. For example, what was Wall Street like in 2007 before the crash? I’m sure lots of people were telling themselves that their companies were just providing liquidity and efficiency, opening up markets and access, and democratizing finance. They probably told themselves all these things about how their companies were making the world a better place and so that justified their outsized rewards. Was that a cult? Probably, in a way.

Silicon Valley elites are going through the same sort of thing now: because they have all this power and all this money, they have to create a narrative that allows themselves to feel good about it. The billionaire founder who walks past dozens of homeless people on his way to work has to tell himself that whatever start-up he’s working on is going to make the world a better place – better than any other allocation of the money that’s been invested in this start-up. And you can’t really tell yourself that without believing in something that is kind of irrational. Maybe that’s what it means to be ‘cult-like’. It’s almost religious in that aspect – it’s something you can’t really argue with people about. There’s no way to ‘logic and reason’ them into believing something else.

Yes, Silicon Valley is cult-like. But the real problem with Silicon Valley is that it has all this power and it is very difficult for the people within this bubble to ever see out of it. Silicon Valley is what happens when you have a lot of wealth and power among a small number of people in a very insular environment.

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See his website https://aidanbeatty.com/
Whitfield, D.

**Public Alternative to the Privatisation of Life,**

Spokesman, 2019, £25, 978085124 8837, pp580

Reviewed by Stuart Fairweather

PUBLIC ALTERNATIVE TO THE PRIVATISATION OF LIFE is the shortened title of Whitfield’s latest book. The notion of the privatisation of life is dramatic in language and scope. This is appropriate given the enormity of the task that Whitfield looks to take on. A task that does not merely involve the descriptive but one that includes outlining the actions required to challenge privatisation and the ideology that underpins it.

The result is a book that will be a useful resource for trade unionists and environmental, political and community campaigners everywhere because of the book’s global outlook. Privatisation and the commodification of all things ‘public and planet’ has been an overarching aspiration of neo-liberalism over the last three decades. Whitfield attempts to respond to this. International examples, comparisons, case studies and analysis are all employed to illustrate the impact of the ideology of privatisation.

Helpfully, a structure is suggested for those using the book as a starting point to respond to that ideology. Three sections are provided to assist the reader. The first explains the thrust of financialisation, marketisation, individualisation and privatisation. These connected policies are assessed in scope and scale. The second provides evidence on the impact of the policies associated with privatisation detailing the extraction of profit and its negative impact on democracy, accountability and equality. The third attempts to set out a ‘radical agenda for decommodification’ doing this by asserting an alternative, one that promotes public ownership, re-municipalisation, democracy, ‘radical public management’ and investment.

How far does the book go in addressing the purpose of each section mentioned above? From the perspective of this Scottish local government trade unionist, it goes a long way. Over the last ten years I have been directly involved in organising demonstrations and deputations to oppose cuts to council services. During that period the spectre of privatisation has increasingly permeated the thinking of managers and politicians. Relationships of care for citizens, communities and the environment have been rebranded as relationships of consumption. ‘Public Alternative’ offers a challenge to this.

It does this by reminding us in section one of the close relationships between privatisation and the global move towards automation and mega-cities. Here in Scotland, we know about centralisation and city deals. We also know about the impact of new technology. In this context, Whitfield highlights that the ‘tech industry is gender-biased’, focusing on assumed male interests that impacts algorithms, robots and the tasks they might do. It is IBM, Cisco and Software AG which are benefitting financially and influencing this agenda and not female social care workers. The first section also restates the danger of cities and councils going bust. Privatisation and austerity have driven up poverty. The impact has been on jobs and services. We are reminded that ‘inequality and insecurity should be jointly addressed’.

Section two draws on David Harvey’s work and talks about ‘accumulation by dispossession’. Private capital benefits from the removal of provision from the public. It benefits from contracts but also from greater capacity to extract surplus value from workers pushed into new parts of the private sector. The profits generated create greater capacity for challenging the public sector and targeting its infrastructure. Prices can then be attached to services expanding the opportunity for more exploitation. This has happened because of politicians and the managers they employ embracing a value base ‘limited to outcomes’. Narrow outcomes that fail to see local government’s broader role in relation to the welfare state, climate action or reducing inequality. All this leaves space for ever greater individualisation within society.

The third and final section ask us to think about how we respond. Throughout the book examples are given of opposition and of alternatives being put into place. But for the ideology of privatisation to be fully challenged more is required. Involving citizens, public employees and unions is required. As is a fundamental belief in transparency and accountability. This all needs to be located in a plan to bring services back into the public sphere and to protect them from attack from those who would put profit before people and planet.

Whitfield says that language is a place to start: people should be treated as citizens or passengers not customers. Beyond this, employee conditions should be considered in relation to assessing the contribution of a service to wellbeing. Additionally, radical public management is needed to defend public services from financiers and corporate interests.

Taking on privatisation and all that surrounds it may seem like an enormous task. Unfortunately, failing to respond to this challenge will see the privatisation of everything. Some may level criticism at the concluding chapters for their limited ability to fully describe the way forward. That would be to largely miss the point as this book provides a resource. It is a tool and it is our responsibility to use it.

Stuart Fairweather is a Unite workplace rep and a member of Democratic Left Scotland
McCarraher, E.  
*How Capitalism Became the Religion of Modernity*, Harvard University Press, 2019, pp816, 9780674984615, £31.95  
Reviewed by Sean Sheehan  

The Enchantments of Mammon is not so much a damming indictment of neo-liberalism – do we need another one when the truth is so ecologically obvious? – but of the religion-inspired cant that glossed it in the language of sanctitude.

Over the length of some 800 pages, Eugene McCarraher unpacks one overarching message: capitalism has hideously cloaked the enchantment of the world that pre-modernity, through sensual awareness, magic or prayer, made available to all. The Enlightenment heralded an age of reason, opening the way for unbounded calculations of profit; a development classically charted in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* and hauntingly dissected in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. McCarraher, building on these seminal foundations, catalogues the way capitalism has perverted our desire for what he calls ‘a sacramental way of being in the world’. Paradise, it seems, is all around and in us; we just need to be reborn into realizing this.

His story begins in seventeenth century England but the bulk of the book follows capitalism’s migration to the American continent. What follows is a *tour de force* in some ways but there is too much grist to the author’s mill in his reiteration of the way spiritual tropes informed the spread of corporations, business school management, Fordism and the eulogising of the free market.

What is said about socialism’s appeal in the first half of America’s twentieth century helps explain why Bernie Sanders can use the word without fearing accusations of ‘reds under the bed’ but the author is too keen to promote Christian sentiments as the beating heart of critical dissent (‘The socialist Jesus walked in workmen’s shoes’). His net is drawn too widely and material is sometimes selected to suit his own evangelical purpose. John Ruskin, albeit presciently aware of environmental degradation, receives more attention than Marx and the discussion of anarchism is restricted to Emma Goldman. Lucy Parsons is not mentioned and while Alexander Berkman is briefly touched on -his piety is not related to his awful prison experience and he is unfairly reduced to ‘a Franciscan girded with a pistol’.

The author has unearthed some good stories to tell but there is an irony to his claim that capitalism feeds off the same hopes and anxieties that were formerly entrusted to traditional religion. McCarraher, the proselytiser, offers his own theology as an antidote to neo-liberalism. ‘The grandeur of God’, he claims, can never be defeated and he calls for ‘repentance and renewal’. Some readers might find Extinction Rebellion more convincing as McCarraher seems to have misplaced our souls in a disenchanted world in his search for a new evangelicalism.


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The Jimmy Reid Foundation

News from the Jimmy Reid Foundation

Due to the coronavirus crisis, our planned fringe meeting at the STUC in April – and the STUC itself – was cancelled. The title for the meeting was ‘Constitutional options for Scotland – which way forward for progressive politics?’ It was to launch a pamphlet the Foundation has commissioned from Professor James Mitchell of the University of Edinburgh on constitutional options for Scotland. When the crisis is over and social distancing rules relaxed, we shall arrange to launch the pamphlet.

Meanwhile, COP26 in Glasgow in November 2020 has also been cancelled. The Foundation was intending to launch a paper during that week in Glasgow from Dr Eurig Scandrett of Queen Margaret University in Edinburgh on reducing the working week as part of a move to ‘A Just Transition’. We hope that this launch might still yet be possible at that time.

For further information on the Foundation, please visit our website: http://reidfoundation.org/
This is, indeed, a strange time that we are living through. At the end of last year, when we all were making our predictions for 2020, no one would have forecast that a 99-year-old World War II veteran would become a national hero for walking around his own garden.

Indeed, it’s strange to think that even two short months ago, we were all obsessed with trivialities such as Brexit, global warming and terrorism. Now, everybody is terrified that we’re all going to die, and that the few of us who are fortunate enough to survive will do so in a world where it is impossible to buy toilet paper, tinned tomatoes or hand-sanitising gel.

The lack of hand gel is actually not a huge problem for most of us. Washing our hands with soap and warm water is equally hygienic. Furthermore, since hand gel is basically just alcohol, I have developed a cleansing system whereby I take large amounts of alcohol internally, and self-sanitise with my own sweat. I’m not 100% convinced that it works, but I am willing to carry on with the experiment for the immediate future, as it appears to make the home-isolation less boring.

I am sure I am not alone in that I have been acquiring some new skills during lockdown. I can now bake bread and cut my own hair. Also, thanks to Matt Hancock, I now know how to wash my hands properly. Who knew you were supposed to sing ‘God Save The Queen’? Bizarrely, we were never taught that when I was in the Cubs.

I don’t know whether statistics are detailed enough yet to suggest that Rangers fans are less likely to catch Coronavirus as a result. However, it could explain the low rate of infection in Northern Ireland compared to the mainland Britain. Roughly 50% of the population will be washing their hands several times a day. And that’s before the hand-washing season really kicks in this July.

Ironically, the advice didn’t do Matt Hancock himself any good, as the man charged with looking after everybody else’s health immediately caught the virus himself. As did Boris Johnson and Prince Charles. One is left to conclude that neither the Prime Minister nor the Heir to the Throne actually know the words to ‘God Save The Queen’.

Charlie, of course, having already tested positive for the virus decided to re-locate to Scotland before self-isolating in one of his several homes. As a member of an at-risk group himself, he showed a gob-smacking lack of consideration to others by travelling to a country where 5,000,000 have the underlying health issue of being Scottish.

Johnson, likewise, once released from hospital, ignored his own government’s advice to stay in one place, and immediately moved into his second home in the country. What is a resigning matter if you are Scotland’s Chief Officer for Health, is apparently acceptable behaviour if you are the PM or the Prince of Wales.

If you ask me, I don’t reckon Boris Johnson every actually had Coronavirus. Like a lot of people who are under the cosh at work and realise they’re not up to the job, I reckon he just decided the best course of action was to throw a sickie and pretend to be ill for a couple of weeks, and leave someone else to sort out the mess he had made of the whole business.

Initially, the person left in temporary control was Michael Gove, a man who looks like he is riddled with every single virus known to the medical profession. However, the rest of the cabinet then seem to have decided it would be best if Gove were to isolate himself from them, and we were left with Dominic Raab and Rishi Sunak running the country.

Which brings us to the bizarre thing no-one could have predicted back in January, namely that this Tory government would give Britain its most left-wing Chancellor since Stafford Cripps. He has not only pledged that the Treasury will pay 80% of employees’ wages, but that they will also make substantial payments to the self-employed. He promised that, for example, beauticians and tanning salons, would qualify for state hand-outs.

This really is ground-breaking. While a number of beauty parlours and tanning shops are, indeed, legitimate businesses, it is a known secret that many of them are fronts for organised crime. For the first time in history, money-laundering is going to be nationalised.

Of course, there is a possibility this was all talk and little else. At the time of writing, only a pitifully small percentage of businesses and individuals had actually received any government money. It could be that this Big Promise, much like Boris’s ‘positive diagnosis’ turns out to be a big con-trick.

Vladimir McTavish, circumstances allowing, will be performing his solo show 60 MINUTES TO SAVE THE WORLD at The Stand Comedy Clubs in Edinburgh, Glasgow and Newcastle in July 2020. Further details on www.thestand.co.uk
ScotRail is failing to deliver for the people of Scotland. The performance of Abellio has been truly terrible. The company has failed to recruit enough drivers, is continually skipping stations, does not have enough rolling stock, has used HSTs that have not been refurbished, and has a history of poor industrial relations. But we don’t want to replace one failing private train operator with another because the model is broken. It is clear to everyone – to businesses as well as passengers, and to everyone who works in the rail industry – that privatisation has failed. The Tories privatised our railways and the SNP refuses to bring our services back into public ownership. But it’s time to stand up for Scotland and run our railway as a public service, not as a vehicle to make a private profit.

Mick Whelan, general secretary
Dave Caife, president
Kevin Lindsay, ASLEF’s organiser in Scotland