what’s left on the list?

We take on the issues that the Left in Scotland needs to move on NOW
So, Boris’s near death experience this spring did not bring about any noticeable change of heart in his politics. Those that cared for him, like the hundreds of thousands of other public service workers, were clapped every Thursday for many weeks. Then Johnson’s government decided to slap them with a pay rise that did not take account of any of their sacrifices they’d made. ‘Once a Tory, always a Tory’ would seem to ring true. This was further proven by his and the Chancellor, Rishi Sunak’s, mini-budget in July. Promising a Roosevelt-ian ‘New Deal’ to ‘build, build, build’ the economy out of an oncoming depression and apropos of the subsidised eating out scheme, they gave us instead the equivalent of a Boots’ ‘Meal Deal’. Johnson promised £5bn of public infrastructure projects and much of that is not new money or expenditure. Moreover, the £5bn amounts to just 0.2% of Britain’s GDP. By comparison, overall, the New Deal was estimated to be worth about 40% of the US GDP in 1929.

Yet, as the public debate in Britain is no longer about whether or not the state intervenes, it’s easy for many to think that the Tories have been grudgingly converted from neo-liberalism to Keynesianism. That is until the surface is scratched. When this is done, the key questions become: ‘in whose interests is this expenditure?’, ‘what is its actual purpose?’ and ‘who will benefit?’. It’s hard not to conclude that this is another exercise in further wealth redistribution away from the poor and impoverished and towards the rich and super-rich. For example, the Chancellor, Rishi Sunak, ignored the suggestion from the Resolution Foundation to give every adult a £500 spending voucher aimed at putting money in the pockets of the most needy and which would have generated business for the hard-pressed high streets. Instead, he gave tax breaks and rewards which the already well off will disproportionately benefit from.

As the old saying goes, ‘money begets money’. Yet, owing to spending on items like the furlough scheme, (Westminster) government debt has now exceeded £2tn, equating to over 100% of annual GDP. It is unfathomable that the Tories will not want to start making cuts in public expenditure – and specifically public services – in the run up to the next schedule general election in May 2024 in order to bring this debt down. Their reputation for fiscal prudence would be severely dented otherwise. Of course, they see debt as simply debt and not any form of investment.

In a mirror image of himself, it’s been said that Boris values loyalty over competence. In this situation, it’s somewhat surprising that Keir Starmer and Labour have not made more headway against the Tories. Starmer is more than competent – especially at the dispatch box. So, maybe, it’s because posing as a more competent opposition in the competence stakes isn’t enough when there’s also no presentation of big, alternative ideas. Polling in early August put the Tories ahead of Labour by some 6% to 9%. Of course, that didn’t take into account the staidness rammy over the exam fiasco. The latest polling after that fiasco now puts Labour neck-and-neck with the Tories. But this suggest Labour has benefited from Tory weakness and not Labour strength.

In Scotland, Nicola Sturgeon and the SNP Scottish Government continue to bask in the shadow of this so-called ‘incompetence’ (so-called only because there is a cunning political method in Boris’ overall self-portrayal of bluff and bluster). This is reflected in support for the SNP, for holding another independence referendum and for independence itself. While there has been no Brexit bounce for the nationalists, there certainly has been a curse of Covid for the unionists, leading to much pandemic pain for Tories.

Unlike south of the border, polling does not seem to indicate that Scotland’s own staidness rammy over its own exam fiasco has done much harm to the SNP. The rampant managerialism of the SNP has, nonetheless, shown up a level of ‘incompetence’ over the exams but the feeling is there are much bigger issues to fry. In Scotland, Labour continues to be seen to be the author of its own fate by opposing a further referendum on independence. It just cannot seem to get its head around the attested reality that all the things it says are wrong about Scotland – and which it is right about - means the avenue of an independent Scotland becomes an increasingly credible one for many more people. Added to its own internal factional battles, it will be hard for Labour to get a hearing for its many progressive policies. Of course, the SNP has been helped by the Scottish Tories having their own internal turmoil.

Lastly, the Black Lives Matter campaign in Britain has proven to be more than a mere moment after the murder of George Floyd in the US. Whether it will translate into a movement, and one that can achieve effective and deep-seated change, remains to be seen. For example, the recent racial profiling of black men and women – including Labour MP, Dawn Butler – and the harassment of black activists like Kevin Hinds, both by the police, indicates how pervasive and embedded racism is within the institutions of society and state in Britain.

This issue addresses all of these matters and some more as well. We look forward to any feedback you might have on the articles – if so, email the editor, Professor Gregor Gall (gregorgall@outlook.com).

An apology and a notice
Due to Covid-19 complications at our printers, the last issue of *Scottish Left Review* (118, July/August) was put up online for free viewing before hard copies were delivered to our paying subscribers. For that, we apologise.

Also, as we have not had access to our office at West Campbell Street in Glasgow since mid-March, we have not had any access to any posted mail to us. We will respond to any mail once non-essential offices are re-opened. Please bear with us on that.
Failing the test: the calamity of COVID-19 testing in Scotland

Lilian Macer exorciates the Scottish Government’s approach as inadequate to deal with pandemic we are facing

The World Health Organisation (WHO) in early March told us the best way to combat the COVID-19 outbreak was through testing. ‘TEST, TEST, TEST’ was the clear message from the WHO. It was clear that diagnostic testing for COVID-19 is critical to tracking the virus, understanding its epidemiology and to suppressing transmission. So, despite the advice form WHO, instead of maximising population testing in the Britain and Scotland, our governments decided to stop the widespread testing of symptomatic individuals to a focus on testing acute hospital inpatients.

We know that testing is an important tool in the overall approach to managing the pandemic and reducing as far as is possible all of the harms caused by COVID-19. Therefore, it is a concern that in the face of this public health emergency, the Westminster government testing strategy is heavily reliant on a private sector delivery model. Companies such SERCO who have secured a lucrative government contract for contact-tracing with an abysmal track record of failing time after time to deliver on government contracts. Despite being fined more than £1m for failures on another government contract just months ago, more public money is handed over to it. The privatisation of public services, again at the heart of this Westminster Government’s agenda, sees the outrageous handing over the £45.8m test-and-trace contract. This yet again puts a market driven ethos before the health, welfare and safety of the population.

Over the past 5 months, the Scottish Government has issued numerous guidance and policy initiatives on COVID-19 testing. However, there is no link with a strategy to deliver on the policy objectives so unnecessary additional problems have been created. There is a hugely confused landscape where policy needs to be linked to a clearly defined strategy that brings clarity for health boards in Scotland. As an example, there is increasing confusion and misunderstanding regarding the policy to screen all asymptomatic and pre-symptomatic staff in care homes on a weekly basis, and if there is supporting clinical evidence of the benefit from this policy intervention, why are only care home staff and not the entirety of health and social care workforce being included as well? The possible only explanation for targeting only care home staff is that it derives from a politically rather than a clinically driven decision. We need an honest discussion that brings clarity for everyone and not, as the Scottish Government have allowed, the priorities on testing to be driven by a reaction to political pressure. In times of uncertainty – and there is no doubt that we are living through such times - and in the face of complex problems, we need to see a clearly defined strategic direction that has public safety as its focus and not any political point scoring.

In late May, the Scottish Government launched its policy on ‘Test, Trace and Isolate (Test and Protect)’ which is now seen as an important part of the Scottish Government’s pathway to combatting COVID-19. However, the worry is if we do not address the misunderstanding and confusion that exist by producing a coherent strategy, then we will not succeed in the goal to protect our communities from this virus. The lack of strategic direction has meant that health boards have introduced their own policy around clinical priority and effectiveness in order to manage a level of control to meet the capacity.

We have seen already from other parts of Britain, and around the world, how quickly cases can become large outbreaks with transmission spiking across entire workplaces, or cities, leading to local lockdowns and reversal of progress made in suppressing the virus. As our schools across Scotland re-open their doors to pupils, the importance of having a robust system of contact tracing has been brought into sharp focus. Here, the ability of experienced public health practitioners will be vital in suppressing transmission of the virus. The strategic use of diagnostic testing in different transmission scenarios of COVID-19, from no cases to community transmission, including how testing needs to be driven through the entire public health agenda and both in policy and action.

In the past, the supply of re-agents has not been matched to demand, and this together with the workforce demands as paused health services are stood back up, requires that the testing capacity within Scotland is prioritised but on the basis of public health and clinical evidence and not political pressure. As health boards and local authorities move into addressing the winter pressures that will emerge on our public health system, it is important to understand that testing is part of our overall public health approach designed to minimise transmission of the virus. However, testing does not, in and of itself, reduce transmission of the virus. That is why it is always important to see it as one part of the picture and to have a continual focus on the use of face coverings, avoidance of crowded place, cleaning of surfaces and physical distancing so that they can play a critical role in reducing opportunities for the virus to spread.

Our health and social care workers are at the front line of the COVID-19 response. In order that they can deliver on the testing policy/guidance, we require clarity of vision through a joined-up approach within a coherent testing strategy from the Scottish Government. If our dedicated workforce is to continue the battle against this virus on top of the pressures winter will bring to our overstretch health and care services, the tools and resources need to be made available as a matter of urgency.

Lilian Macer is the Convenor of UNISON Scotland.
Keep your 2m distance during the pandemic

Andrew Watterson, Rory O’Neill, Janet Newsham and Hilda Palmer critique the carelessness and incompetence of government policy and practice

The two-metre (2m) ‘social distance’ guidance during the pandemic lockdown soon became entangled in politics and economics rather than the science. It was weakened and then ditched in England on 4 July. It was ‘relaxed’ with caveats and warnings after 9 July rather than abandoned wholesale in Scotland. Public health and worker health were sidestepped in the process and parts of Britain and its economy were put at risk. Mainstream media were often easily manipulated, evidence was often ignored or lacking, scientists were silenced or out-maneuvered and the precautionary principle was breached. English and Scottish politicians at times responded differently but in several respects the outcomes proved very similar. 2m was changed to 1m plus despite both the English Chief Medical Officer and Chief Scientific Advisor at the time repeatedly re-iterating the fact that 2m distance was significantly safer than 1m. Powerful reasons remain for restoring the 2m guidance in many places indoors for public and worker safety.

A successful media campaign was mounted over several weeks to reduce the 2m distancing guidance primarily based on a spurious argument that in 2020, the justification for 2m came from 1930s outdated research. The 1930s research ignored airborne transmission and, as 241 scientists indicated, current research shows potential inhalation for COVID-19 spread could be up to several metres (Clinical Infectious Diseases July 2020). The argument was not evidence-based but part of an extensive and well-thought strategy used primarily by politicians in England at the time and also by lobbyists in Scotland. The politicians ably supported by several economists and one sociologist filled the TV and radio air waves and newspaper columns south and north of the border, frequently unchallenged. Ian Duncan Smith made unevienced judgements about epidemiology and argued the 2m guidance should be reduced. In Scotland, economists with links to the Scottish Government and no expertise in public health ramped up the media pressure to drop 2m. The campaigners argued the risks of economic damage from the lockdown outweighed the public health risks of 1m or 1m plus. Others argued mitigation measures would offset risks from reducing the 2m distance.

Yet, the evidence at the time the decision to reduce 2m was taken was either weak or did not exist to show such mitigation measures worked or could work in the future. These measures included as observing 1m distance, wearing masks, improved ventilation and cleaning in many workplaces and locations underpinned by effective test, track and trace schemes. Indeed, the opposite was true. In most circumstances neither mitigation nor effective test, track and trace were available. In many settings, employers had been actively discouraged from purchasing effective respirators, to reserve limited stocks for health care and social care settings. In other settings, like schools, mask use was actively discouraged and social distancing abandoned as a mitigating strategy.

Scientific evidence from the 2020s, and not the 1930s and 1940s, indicated a strong case for supporting and even extending the 2-metre social distancing guidance in some circumstances (Environmental Health News 18 2020). Also, important gaps in our knowledge also emerged that justified adopting a precautionary policy when considering any changes in the 2m guidance. On 21 June 2020 the informed view was ‘until there is compelling evidence to the contrary, Independent SAGE advises against any reduction in social distancing in indoor settings’. It went further and noted the 1m reduction would ‘not only lead to an increased physical transmission of infection …… [but] also undermine the psychological resolve we need to deal with the pandemic’.

Significant risks from airborne and large droplet transmission were identified (Clinical Infectious Diseases July 2020, Physics of Fluids May 2020, International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health April 2020). The ILO (2020) Canada and Spain supported 2m wherever possible. Evidence from clusters elsewhere supported more caution and the 2m figure. In addition, evidence from US workplace clusters stresses the importance of 2m physical distancing (Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report 7 August 2020).
maintain with others. So, reducing it to 1m is akin to removing any restrictions from distancing, and hence functions as another signal of back to normal'. If compliance with mitigation measures - as well as the means to monitor, inspect and regulate those measures - is likely to be poor, then such a relaxation was very questionable. However, until the 10 August 2020 in Scotland they were non-statutory guidance measures to protect the public.

The Scottish Government adopted a welcome and far more cautious and gradual approach to easing lockdown than that in England in terms of policy changes, policy detail and language, and in terms of engaging and consulting with workers and employers. It undoubtedly sent out a stronger COVID-19 public health message and worked at managing expectations of coming out of lockdown much better. Nevertheless, it still reduced the 2m distance to 1m – in England it was 1m plus – and still appeared heavily reliant on UK scientific information that was either limited or simply flawed. Although at the moment, there have not been clusters on the scale of those in Leicester, the informed predictions of the behavioural scientists have sadly come to pass and social distancing, avoiding crowded spaces and other mitigation measures supposedly adopted to keep people safe have failed. This has resulted in clusters in call centres and bars in Scotland. Little attention has been paid to the fact that risks to the public from opening up the hospitality sector will add to the risks of workers too.

These are ’live’ issues as occupational health and safety problems with a reduction of 2m to 1m have emerged in a variety of clusters not just in factories and call centres but also in bars and restaurants in Scotland. Effective monitoring, inspection and regulation to enforce even the 1m guidance has been almost non-existent (Greenock Telegraph 11 June 2020) but this is critical to effective social distancing by HSE, environmental health officers and the police.

Workplace reductions in the 2m guidance need to be based on sound evidence and demonstrate any control measures will be effective. The health and safety hierarchy should be applied by removing risks first, then using engineering controls and enhanced cleaning etc. PPE that is appropriate is a last resort. Evidence not only supports the 2m guidance but in some circumstances supports its extension (British Medical Journal May 2020, Lancet 1 June 2020, Guardian 12 June 2020). Any reductions in 2m guidance must be based on detailed, validated policies and procedures able to effectively protect vulnerable workers, children and the wider public. Current evidence continues to support the general importance of the combined use of social distancing, use of masks and other PPE and handwashing not removing or reducing parts of this strategy. This approach has been continually stressed by the Scottish Government. There must also be continued employment, wage protection and suspension of punitive sickness absence and performance management system, to encourage safe practices including self-isolation.

Those who run the risks of social distance changes should be fully involved and consulted about them at both workplace and national levels. At a time when we have reduced distancing, we are increasing potential contacts several fold, especially by pressing for a return to workplaces and schools. This strategy ignores the potential health, social and economic harm of a stop-start-repeat cycle driven by a desire to achieve a normality that cannot exist at this time. Often those making decisions about risk in Scotland rarely run them. The recent clusters continue to show why the risks to public health from the pandemic are still considerable for workers too. They indicate why it is so important for those working in risky settings to have a means to influence health and safety decisions such as the 2m guidance in the future. The Scottish Government has shown some commitment to Fair Work principles and consulting unions about guidance on health and safety issues relating to COVID-19. Whether it will be able to deliver on those promises in the future and improve worker health and safety and public health post-pandemic looks more problematic. This is especially the case when the managers of large Scottish estates and corporate lobbyists have surprisingly been given the task of preparing reports for the Scottish Government on economic recovery post-COVID-19 and economic policy that have marginalised and ignored worker health and safety.

- This article is an abridged version of ‘KEEP YOUR DISTANCE: Is two metres too far or not far enough to protect from COVID-19 and who benefits and who loses if it is reduced?’ by the same authors. It can and extensive references to further research can be found at http://www.hazardscampaign.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/two-metre-commentary.pdf

Andrew Watterson is Professor of Health in the Occupational and Environmental Health and Public Health and Population Health research groups at the University of Stirling. Rory O’Neill is a visiting professor at the School of Law and Social Justice, University of Liverpool, the occupational health and workplace safety adviser to the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) and the editor of Hazards magazine www.hazards.org Janet Newsham is the chair of the National Hazards Campaign and Coordinator at Greater Manchester Hazards Centre. Hilda Palmer, a biologist and workers’ health and safety advisor, worked at Greater Manchester Hazards Centre for 33 years and is the facilitator of Families Against Corporate Killers.

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UNISON fought at the time to get this saying it has failed. Now even more are economists said at the time that this at the expense of public services. Many taxpayers’ money to bail out the banks. The ongoing effects of austerity - the What councils are dealing with are the most vulnerable members of our society and often at risk to themselves and their families. Many have worked from home, putting in long hours and taking on additional duties to ensure that essential services are maintained and children and vulnerable adults are protected. Others have set up new services, like the care hubs which have cared for the children of essential workers and our most vulnerable children. This has been well recognised with weekly claps for carers and others earlier in the lockdown. References to ‘unskilled’ work have been replaced in the political rhetoric as communities recognise the worth of these workers. However, this is not reflected in their pay and conditions.

The second is the clear fact that council services have been woefully under-resourced over the past ten years. Already dealing with massive cuts to their budgets, councils’ response to Covid-19 has brought many to the brink of financial ruin. The budget shortfall for Scottish councils is estimated by UNISON to be around £1 billion. The additional monies from the Westminster government, if finally passed on to councils by the Scottish Government, will barely touch the sides of this massive funding gap.

What councils are dealing with are the ongoing effects of austerity - the strategy whereby government used taxpayers’ money to bail out the banks at the expense of public services. Many economists said at the time that this wouldn’t work. Now even more are saying it has failed.

UNISON fought at the time to get this message across to our members and the wider public that austerity would be bad for communities and bad for the economy. The union pointed out that healthy public services are integral to a healthy economy because public service workers spend in local shops and businesses and pay their taxes. In 2010, public service workers spent 70p in every £1 earned in their local economies. As jobs have been lost, and pay freezes and caps have kept wages artificially low, with many council workers dependent on top-up benefits and living on the poverty line, the amount spent in local economies has lessened with a knock-on impact on shops and businesses.

Many on the left warned that we were not ‘all in this together’ and that council services are much more important to the poorest in our communities. Yet whilst council services have been cut to the bone, and food banks are on the rise, alongside child poverty, zero hours contracts and insecure labour, the wealthiest in our society have amassed more wealth and paid fewer taxes. Research by the Equalities Trust has shown that the 1,000 richest people in the UK in 2018 had a total wealth of £724bn, an increase of £274bn in five years.

Scotland is not immune. Government figures from 2015-2018 show that income inequality in this country is also growing, with the top 10% of the population earning more than the bottom 40% combined. Nor is the Scottish Government innocent when it comes to attacks on council budgets. Holyrood has passed on more cuts to councils than even came down from Westminster. Figures from the Scottish Parliament Information Centre (SPICe) show that between 2013/14 and 2018/19, the real terms local government revenue settlement decreased by 7.5% whilst the Scottish Government’s revenue budget reduced only by 2.8%.

So what needs to happen now? Proper funding for council services is an obvious priority. It is clear that the money is there. The Westminster Chancellor of the Exchequer has rightly pulled out the stops to provide for furlough schemes, PPE and testing regimes. But let’s also not forget how much money has gone to Tory cronies in the private sector for services that may or may not have been delivered.

We need to build from the fact that our council workers have been valued so highly throughout the pandemic. Their worth in the eyes of politicians, the media and the wider public must not be allowed to plummet again and we must demand that it is reflected in how we assess their pay and conditions.

We must demand braver use of the powers the Scottish Government already has - more progressive taxation and the will to tackle the regressive council tax. We need to get away from viewing borrowing for long term investment as solely ‘debt’ and see it as a positive strategy to build a fairer and more sustainable society; and we need a national care service, publicly funded and run, which does not allow profit to be made out of social care. The time is now for the Scottish Government to decently fund councils with less central control, to enable them to fulfill their role in promoting social wellbeing and responding to local needs.

The massive underfunding of public services was always a political choice and I see worrying signs that as Covid-19 cases begin to lessen and we look towards a recovery, the same messages as before are creeping into the narrative - messages that we need to ‘tighten our belts’ and that ‘we are all in this together’. This has to be resisted at all costs. Those of us who care about a more equal society need to begin exploding the myths about council services being a drain on the economy and show how they are absolutely fundamental to a healthy economy. The alternative doesn’t bear thinking about.

Kate Ramsden is Chair of UNISON Scotland’s Communications and Campaigns Committee, member of UNISON’s National Executive Committee, and the Communications Officer and Branch Co-chair for Aberdeenshire UNISON and Web Manager for its website (http://aberdeenshireunion.org)
Don’t throw our members under the bus

Pat Rafferty looks at the case of ADL to argue that only government action can secure green jobs and help gain a green and just transition

Alexander Dennis Limited (ADL) is a Scottish and UK success story. A global player in the manufacture of bus and coach, with recognised expertise in double-deckers. To put it simply, it leads the field. Prior to Covid-19, the company and its skilled workforce were looking forward to a strong and positive future. The company had record orders on the books. Governments and businesses were investing in green public transportation to reverse the threat of climate change and the workforce was facing the future with confidence.

However, in late August, Alexander Dennis announced that it plans to axe at least 160 jobs at its Falkirk and Larbert bases in Scotland, which together employ 850 workers. As part of its global restructuring plans, the North American parent company, New Flyer Industries (NFI), also confirmed that it will close production at its site in Guildford, Surrey, with the loss of 200 jobs, as well as making sweeping redundancies at its plant in Scarborough. In total, 650 highly-skilled jobs will go over the coming months unless swift intervention is taken by the Scottish and UK Governments.

The severity of these cuts at Alexander Dennis are premature and risk being detrimental to their long-term success. We understand that the company is not facing cash flow problems but currently they have a lack immediate orders and work. The UK Government has been clear and promised funding for 4,000 low emission buses through a £3bn fund. These funds must be made available now.

In Scotland, the government must act on the recommendations of the Just Transition Commission by rapidly rolling-out their promised £500m for green transport. This investment would include a nationwide bus scrappage scheme and the purchase of a fleet of electric buses for COP 26, the UN Climate Change Conference, to be hosted in Glasgow in 2021. We also urgently need to know how quickly can the new Ultra-Low Emission Bus Scheme work in practice and will bus operators such as Lothian Buses be able to access this scheme immediately.

In Scotland, transport has regularly accounted for a large part of emissions. The sector accounts for around 37% of all carbon emissions and has seen a decrease of only 4.9% between 1990 and 2018. Car generated 40% of this total whereas bus and coach account for only 3.2% of all transport emissions. The need for a green mass transport revolution is clear. We need to re-balance the economy through cleaner and greener transport, and more importantly encourage people back on the buses.

We don’t have to look far to see an example of what can be achieved. Fare-free buses operate in the French channel port of Dunkirk, a city of 200,000 people. There, free bus travel has proved an overwhelming success, with a 50% increase in passenger numbers overall and almost 85% on some routes. Bus routes and bus fleets have been extended and include green buses run on natural gas. Whereas in Scotland, according to Transport Scotland, estimates indicate that there were 388m bus journeys made in Scotland in 2017/18 compared with 487m in 2007/08, a drop of nearly 100m over the past decade.

Alexander Dennis’ parent company, NFI, has a responsibility to their skilled workforce. It must show loyalty to its thousands of workers who made ADL a global success. Buses are not just built in the boardroom. NFI’s recent quarter two results for 2020 raise questions over its motivations. It is clear that decisions are being made not just as a result of the current short-term difficulties that Covid 19 has brought to the industry, but as part of a group-wide cost cutting program with cuts of over £15m announced to their manufacturing base. These are cuts that the company planned to make before the Covid pandemic. These cuts are being pushed through despite the company stating that recovery in the industry will happen and that they have a bullish outlook for 2021. UNITE believes this approach is unjustified and will be detrimental to NFI’s long term success. We have a clear message for NFI and for both the Scottish and UK Governments: ‘Don’t throw our members under the bus.’

More generally, the devastating news from Alexander Dennis highlights the precarious state of Scotland’s green manufacturing capacity. We have the ongoing issues at BiFab and CS Wind where next to no orders have been placed with either company for years now. If the Scottish Government seriously wishes to deliver upon the nation’s climate change target of a net zero economy by 2045 then strategic support must be given to businesses based in Scotland in the interests of protecting jobs and the environment. If this support is not forthcoming then meeting this target will be achieved by the extensive importation of wind towers, wind turbines and buses at the expense of creating thousands of highly-skilled jobs across our nation.

Pat Rafferty is the Scottish Secretary of the UNITE union

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The Jimmy Reid Foundation

New paper: Occupational health and safety in Scotland after the Covid-19 pandemic: the case for new principles, policies and practices

In early August 2020, the Foundation released a new report on occupational health and safety in Scotland after the Covid-19 pandemic by Professor Andrew Watterson of the University of Stirling. The paper argues the case for new principles, policies and practices involving lessons society should apply. Set in the framework of the ascendency of neo-liberalism which has driven de-regulation on occupational health and safety throughout Britain but where the Holyrood Parliament has the opportunity to diverge in many respects from the path pursued by Westminster, the paper makes a number of recommendations including that Scotland needs an independent, properly resourced and staffed occupational health and safety body with effective representation at board level for workers and their unions, employers, local authorities and communities.

Building back better in the ‘Dear Green Place’ with free buses and trains

Ellie Harrison makes the case for getting Glasgow to go green and free in its transport system

September 2020 sees Get Glasgow Moving joining forces with unions, climate movement and community campaigns to launch the ‘Free Our City’ coalition in Glasgow. Inspired by hundreds of forward-thinking cities across the world – from Kansas to Calais – we’re demanding that our politicians deliver a world-class, fully-integrated and accessible public transport network that’s free at the point of use. This radical policy is now urgent and necessary to ensure our city makes a just and green recovery from the pandemic – a recovery which addresses the climate emergency and tackles gross inequalities in our society.

Free public transport benefits everyone, but especially those living on low incomes, young people, women and black and ethnic minorities – who all rely on public transport more. In Glasgow, with such low car-ownership (49% of households), free public transport would reduce social isolation and lift people out of poverty. Last year, Glasgow City Council declared a ‘climate emergency’ and agreed the target of reducing the city’s emissions to net-zero by 2030. One of their Climate Emergency Working Group’s Recommendations was to undertake a ‘formal assessment of the potential for making the transition to a public transport system that is free to use’.

The Free Our City coalition has been founded to ensure this ‘assessment’ becomes action to make this policy a reality sooner rather than later. Reliance on private cars is the main cause of carbon emissions and toxic air pollution in our city. In order to meet the 2030 target, car mileage will have to be cut by as much as 60% over a decade. We need to provide universal and comprehensive public transport so that everyone can fully-participate in the social and economic life of our city without need or aspiration to own a car.

Free public transport also has economic benefits far outweighing the cost of running it – returning £1.70 to the economy for every £1 spent, and it can pay for itself in increased tax receipts. But it is only practical and cost-effective to deliver with full public control of the whole public transport network – trains, Subway and buses. Glasgow’s Subway is currently the only part publicly-owned and controlled (by SPT), which is why fares are so much cheaper than the buses. But the tide is turning. Transport Secretary, Michael Matheson, announced in December 2019 that he would end Abellio’s contract to run ScotRail three years early, in 2022, and we’re campaigning for a public sector operator to take over trains. And we now have new powers available in the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019 to re-regulate our bus network (under ‘franchising’) and set up a publicly-owned bus company for Greater Glasgow to take over routes and reconnect the communities left stranded as a result of cuts by private bus companies.

The coronavirus crisis has proved public transport is an essential public service to get key-workers to their jobs. It has also laid bare the absurdities of running our public transport on a for-profit basis. The need to maximise profits from fares is not compatible with current social distancing guidance. In the present privatised system, when we needed to reduce services during government lockdown, they ended up costing us more to run! The Scottish Government has already bailed-out failing private bus companies by more than £300m. This should be an opportunity to buy back our buses, so that they can be run in the public good for the long term.

There are many ways to improve the safety of our public transport. Public control is central to them all. If we own and run our own buses and trains, then we control the safety for staff and passengers. We can improve pay, conditions and training for staff. And, we can deliver far more frequent and reliable services for passengers to reduce overcrowding, and better plan the routes to speed-up journey times and minimise the need for interchange. We can upgrade the fleet to zero-emissions electric buses and make them more spacious, with air-conditioning and multiple entrances and exits.

We need to use this crisis as an opportunity to build back a far better public transport network, which actually serves our needs and helps us meet the many challenges of the decade ahead. Once the pandemic has passed, we will be faced with a massive economic crisis and a climate emergency that is not going away. Building a world-class, fully-integrated and accessible public transport network – free at the point of use – will provide the thousands of high quality, ready-to-go green jobs that we’ll urgently need for our city to make a just and green recovery.

- The ‘Imagine if Buses were free’ online conference launches the ‘Free Our City’ coalition on Saturday 19 September 2020, 11am-1pm twitter.com/FreeOurCityGl and facebook.com/FreeOurCityGlasgow
- Get Glasgow Moving, Glasgow Trades Council, Campaign Against Climate Change, Scottish Youth Climate Strike, Scot.E3, Glasgow Calls Out Polluters, and Divest Strathclyde came together in 2019 to demand free public transport for the Greater Glasgow region ahead of the United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP26) in Glasgow. When the coronavirus crisis meant COP26 was postponed until November 2021, we re-grouped and reformed to launch the ‘Free Our City’ coalition

Useful links


Ellie Harrison is an artist and activist based in Glasgow. She is founder and co-ordinator of Bring Back British Rail and the current Chair of the Get Glasgow Moving public transport campaign.
How green is the EU recovery plan?

Molly Scott-Cato assesses the pros and cons of efforts in Europe to make a green just transition

The mantra ‘Build Back Better’ is reverberating around European Parliaments as the principle that should guide Covid-19 recovery plans and the response to the unprecedented economic crisis caused by the coronavirus. It is vital to measure the gap between the rhetoric and the reality especially when Westminster politics has been reduced to a battle between ‘Build, Build, Build’ and ‘Jobs, Jobs, Jobs’ with the climate getting barely a mention. So, is the EU doing any better?

Under the rubric ‘Repair and prepare for the next generation’, Commission President, Ursula von der Leyden announced the EU’s Covid recovery plan with as much flourish as can be mustered at a time of such huge risk and uncertainty. Her plan envisaged for grants of €500bn for a green recovery was cut back to €390bn and is still subject to negotiation by the European Parliament after the summer break. So how Green is the proposal and how is it likely to be changed by the Parliament?

While protecting public health during the Coronavirus pandemic has caused an unprecedented economic contraction, it has also offered a platform on which to build a greener and fairer European society. Whether that happens depends on how the proposals are financed and what conditions are put on those receiving grants or loans.

The headlines look promising: the agreement is that 30% of all spending from both the ‘Next Generation’ fund and the overall budget will be climate spending, including €17.5bn for the ‘Just Transition Fund’ for climate transition subsidies. To avoid the risk of greenwashing, the Commission is committed to developing a scientific measure of climate spending and the positive impact of spending, together with an annual report on climate spending.

It has to be said that the current EU target for net-zero carbon (NZC) is wholly inadequate, a mere 40% reduction on 1990 emissions by 2030. Here, we are lucky that Germany currently holds the rotating Presidency since pressure from the its national Green Party (riding high on nearly 20% in the polls) has focused minds, with Merkel recently saying that building consensus for a reduction target of 50-55% is a key target of the six months up to December 2020.

The block on this progress will, as ever, come from the eastern European countries, who are still defending their energy-intensive industries and especially, in the case of Poland, their coal industry. The ‘Just Transition’ fund is the key policy to persuade these countries to take climate action seriously and has real teeth, since countries will only receive half of their share if they don’t sign up to the NZC by 2050 target, a weaker target than the 100% exclusion the Commission proposed, but still a powerful incentive to change. The ‘Just Transition’ will also support a wider sustainability transition of the European economy, providing conversion funding to industries such as cement, steel, aluminium, fertiliser or paper production across the Union.

The European Parliament has led the charge on these targets and on strict climate conditions but is likely to threaten to block the deal unless payments to eastern European countries are also made conditional on improvements in the rule of law in especially Poland and Hungary, where authoritarian leaders Morawiecki and Orbán are attacking the independence of the judiciary, undermining free speech, and attacking gay people’s and women’s fundamental rights. This is a battle for the autumn.

Unlike Britain, EU member states continue to benefit from a public development bank to help fund the transition to sustainability. While the European Investment Bank’s (EIB) promise to become Europe’s Climate Bank may feel somewhat premature, it has become a major funder of energy and other climate-friendly investments across the continent. While an MEP, I worked with others to end EIB financing for fossil-related infrastructure and, while its much more sustainable lending policy is welcome, it is important to remember that projects like the Trans-Anatolian pipeline lock fossil fuels into the European economy into the future beyond when NZC becomes a necessity.

Greens in the European Parliament have lobbied long and hard for a minimum climate spend in the budget and can count that a success, but they are now pushing hard for an EU Climate Law with a minimum 65% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2030. As co-leader, Philippe Lambers, said: ‘We have to make sure that indeed our climate efforts, and by that I mean the Climate Law and revising our 2030 targets upwards, are not falling by the wayside’. In other words, while investment in sustainable infrastructure is to be welcome, to avoid backsliding, offsetting and greenwashing, emissions targets must be legally enforceable.

As usual for those who have addressing the climate emergency as a priority, this programme seems to lack the necessary sense of urgency, but it is clearly more ambitious than anything we are likely to see from Boris Johnson’s government. Several years ago, we could have been guaranteed a lion’s share of the energy-saving projects that the Covid recovery programme will fund but because of Brexit we are left at the mercy of a government funded by fossils. With a Chancellor whose idea of building back better is ‘burying carbon’ and a Prime Minister who pursues the rhetorical unicorn of CO2-free aviation or ‘Jet Zero’ we seem doomed to go backwards on the climate agenda at this most crucial time for our planet.

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Uniting and fighting – how unemployed workers can be collectively organised

Dave Sherry recounts previous examples of campaigns to mobilise the unemployed as part of a wider labour movement struggle

The Bank of England predicts Britain will suffer its sharpest contraction since the industrial revolution. Such is the scale of the crisis that unions have to be prepared to organise strikes amongst their members. But what about the unemployed?

Scotland has a long history of organising the unemployed. Its origins lie in the 1919 40-hour strike. Harry McShane was a shop steward involved with the Clyde Workers’ Committee. Celebrations greeting the end of the WW1 soon gave way to a struggle for the 40-hour week. Glasgow was hit harder than most as boom turned to slump. Unemployment rocketed from its wartime average of 0.5% to 11%. Soldiers promised ‘a land fit for heroes’ returned to dole queues.

The strike was not about the preservation of a skilled, male elite. Picketing involved large numbers of women, young people and unemployed ex-servicemen. It saw organisation among the unemployed for the first time, laying the basis for what would later become the National Unemployed Workers’ Movement (NUWM). War brought a dramatic rise in the numbers of women at work but now they were first to be sacked. Employed and unemployed women supported the strike and played a full part in it.

Local meetings decided every morning where to picket. A point was made of involving the local unemployed in spreading the strike. While 40 hours was not achieved, workers returned with their working week reduced from 54 to 47 hours and on better terms than union leaders had negotiated a month earlier. Nonetheless, in 1920 unemployment in Glasgow soared, enabling employers to launch a counter offensive that broke the powerful workplace organisation that had developed during wartime. McShane began organising the unemployed. It was his main task over the next twenty years.

The unemployed gave full rein to Harry’s inventive mind - fighting for increased benefits and against rent hikes and evictions; organising demonstrations when royalty appeared or outside banquets for the rich; and marches, deputations, standing as the unemployed candidate in elections. All were tied to socialist propaganda aimed at mobilising the jobless to fight back.

Having been forced to leave Glasgow to find work, McShane returned in 1930. He was shocked by developments while away. The unemployed movement had collapsed, and adulation of Stalin and characterising Labour as ‘social-fascist’ were at the forefront of Communist Party (CP) activity. Like other CP members, he continued working with whomever he could – including Labour members.

In November 1930, the NUWM in the Vale of Leven organised a march to the dole office - 2,000 women and men involved in a protest that won an extra day’s money they’d lost. Harry played a leading role in re-activating the unemployed movement, to such an extent that 50,000 took part in a Glasgow demonstration in September 1931 against Ramsay MacDonald’s National Government’s cut in unemployment benefit.

Next day, Harry led a demonstration of 30,000 to the City Chambers, demanding they petition the government against the cuts. The council refused so that evening Harry organised a meeting at Glasgow Green but it was attacked by mounted police, provoking a major riot in the city.

The 1932 Hunger March from Glasgow to Westminster began with the Scottish contingent, led by McShane. On arrival, they had to fight through police lines to get into the rally in Hyde Park. Three days later they had to battle the police again in order to present their petition to parliament. In 1933, Harry organised the hunger march from Glasgow to Edinburgh. Marchers occupied the city centre for three days and nights. When the council refused accommodation, Harry said they’d sleep on Princes Street. The marchers demanded free transport home. The Chief Constable and town clerk agreed, providing McShane would guarantee there would be no more NUWM marches to Edinburgh. He refused and the Chief Constable, worried about disturbances in the capital, backed down.

The post-war boom saw full employment until recession returned in the 1970s. In 1976, Labour pushed through welfare cuts worth £87bn in today’s money in response to demands from the IMF and an investment strike. Unemployment rose to a post-war high of 1.6m. The response was an explosion of strikes, protests and marches. The Right to Work (RTW) campaign was launched and McShane – now in his eighties – was delighted to speak at its launch and became its honorary president.

At the end of February 1976, it organised the first national unemployed workers’ march since the 1930s. It ended in a rally at London’s Albert Hall, where McShane held a full house spellbound. Throughout the 1970s, the campaign built and organised among the unemployed and linked up with the employed workers and many union bodies that provided backing and sponsorship for its marches and protests - something the NUWM had been unable to manage in the 1930s.

In return the campaign supported strikes, pickets and occupations. When Thatcher won the 1979 election, Labour moved left under Michael Foot. He Fronted a series of national protests with multiple unions backing and sponsorship for its marches and protests - something the NUWM had been unable to manage in the 1930s.

The period saw factory closures, soaring unemployment and inner-city riots as the Tories used unemployment to break working class resistance. There were no riots in Scotland but large numbers of young unemployed Scots joined RTW, taking part in job centre protests as well as big national demonstrations at the Tory and TUC conferences.

The success of the campaign encouraged the TUC to launch the People’s March for Jobs in 1981 and for unions to help fund and support local unemployed workers’ centres. A decade ago, UNITE launched community branches to encourage recruitment among the unemployed. If ever there was a time for the union movement to recruit and build proper campaigning organisation among the unemployed, it is now.

Dave Sherry is a former TGWU/UNITE shop steward in housing and active member of UNITE’s retired member section as well as a SLR editorial committee member and longstanding SWP member.

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I have spoken on TV and radio about statues many times since the death of George Floyd. I have been actively supporting efforts to bring together all the main Black Lives Matter (BLM) organisers of protests and demonstrations across Scotland. That has borne fruit in the recent formation of the Black Lives Matter Scotland collective with its own organising principles based on intersectional Black liberation politics. As one of the founders of BLM in Glasgow in 2015 when members of the US BLM movement came to Scotland on the Ferguson tour, I am delighted to see the movement kick off in Scotland. We all felt the ‘George Floyd moment’ viscerally and it chimed with that small minority of us who already knew the name of Sheku Bayoh. We felt that hurt and anger all over again. Meanwhile, so many more learned his name for the first time on the BLM demos.

For the last 13 years, I have been active in campaigns to highlight Glasgow’s slavery and colonial legacy. I’ve had some successes as Project Leader of Flag Up Scotland Jamaica lobbying Glasgow University (GU) to commission a report into its slavery origins of the financial bequests that paid for the Gilbert Scott building on Gilmorehill. GU renamed the £400m Student Learning Hub it built on University Avenue, the James McCune Smith Building in recognition of being the first African American to hold a medical degree at the GU. In the University chapel, we dedicated a memorial stone in recognition of the enslaved Africans exploited by Robert Bogle who had owned Gilmorehill. I even was able to run for election as GU Rector with one of my main campaign themes being to complete the Reparative Justice journey begun by this initial creation of an International Study Centre for Scotland’s Hidden Shame. The 2019 signing of the Memorandum of Understanding between the Universities of Glasgow and the West Indies was a memorable act of reparative justice heralded by a specially written poem from Scots Makar, Jackie Kay, and with the Jamaican flag flying above the campus.

I have for all that time argued with councillors and with cultural heritage and architectural experts that the street names and statues need amended by something saying how they got their wealth and that they were not just ‘merchants’ but dealers in commodities – tobacco, sugar and cotton - produced exclusively by chattel slavery. I have been consistent in saying that capitalism in Scotland - particularly its industrial and financial roots - stems from its links to slavery. Glasgow and Edinburgh have had a deliberate organised forgetting of their slavery past. As the title of Dr Stephen Mullen’s seminal 2008 work It Wisnae Us: The Truth about Glasgow and Slavery suggests, ‘it wisnae us’ has been the standard retort when it comes to confronting Scots complicity in the slavery business.

Roll on more than a decade and now the weight of many more historians evidence - including Tom Devine coming round to the Williams thesis (Dr Eric Williams’s 1944 thesis Capitalism and Slavery) shows just how important slavery was to the development and growth of capitalism in Scotland and its development as a nation. Billy Kay on radio with Scotland’s Story and David Hayman on TV in 2018’s landmark two-part BBC documentary Slavery: Scotland's Hidden Shame have both done so much to bring that legacy into the popular arena, prompting widespread discussions on the mythical narratives both British unionists and ‘tartan shortbread’ Scottish nationalists tell themselves about Britain being abolitionists (neatly forgetting the 250 years of slavery bit before abolition) or saying it was the English when in fact much of the so-called English slave trade was, of course, perpetrated by Scots-owned companies in London, Liverpool and Bristol trading with Scots-owned plantations in the Caribbean and the US and with Scots slave traders off the West African Guinea coast.

The racism of yesterday is inextricably linked to the racisms of today and is hard-wired into the very institutions originally created in Scotland during the slavery days which are still with us - universities, courts, big business, banking and finance, land ownership, cultural heritage museums and galleries, the civil service and local and national government.

Yet something new and different happened on 7 June 2020. Spontaneously led BLM demonstrations mobilised the largest crowds of Black people ever seen on Scotland’s streets. Across Scotland perhaps as many as 30,000 were on our streets, our parks and even our beaches from Dumfries to Shetland, from Orkney to Oban and in all our large cities and towns. Many progressive white people responded by trying to be good allies, by no longer being silent in the face of racism. Even Black and African Scots themselves had never felt or seen this before. It was a moment of Black political arrival that has already changed the dynamics of the anti-racism movement in Scotland. No longer are Black Scots satisfied with well-meaning white liberal and leftist leading a struggle that should be for the victims of racism to take the leading role. BLM on 7 June was about the racism in all its forms that young Black Scots have experienced growing up under a devolved Scotland. From micro-aggressions in shops, offices and public places like buses and trains to police harassment and institutionalised racism in the job market and in education, they were reacting to a very distinct Scottish form of racism – partly based on a denialism and false historical narratives that has sadly developed under the very noses of the avowedly anti-racist SNP Government that’s been in charge of these institutions for the last 13 years.

That day in Glasgow’s so-called ‘Merchant City’, members of the Celtic Green Brigade took direct action and affixed their own street names dedicated to Rosa Parks and Sheku Bayoh amongst others in place of...
those streets named after slavery laced merchants like Cochrane, Glassford, Buchanan and Ingram, and George Square became George Floyd Square for the day.

Several significant moments occurred in the Edinburgh protests which centred around the Dundas column and statue in St Andrew Square - Jamaica’s Honorary Consul to Scotland, Sir Geoff Palmer (now 80 years old), spoke passionately on the BLM platform on 7 June that history cannot be changed but that how we react to it can. This Emeritus Professor of Brewing Science and amateur historian has campaigned against the received wisdom about Henry Dundas (Lord Melville). For years, he’s been arguing that Dundas as the virtual dictator of Scotland was single-handedly responsible for allowing slavery to continue for a further 15 years by inserting the word ‘gradually’ into Wilberforce’s abolition bill. Sir Geoff spent two years on an historical advisory committee commissioned by the City of Edinburgh Council to rewrite the words on the plaque in front of the statue. However, right wing historian Michael Fry and the Dundas descendent Lord Bobby Melville fought Geoff to standstill on that committee and prevented its rewording.

Yet, a few weeks later a BLM demo called for the Dundas statue to come down - inspired by the events in Bristol taking Colston’s statue down and in Oxford where Rhodes might finally fall. Edinburgh activists from the BLM movement - reawakened to the presence of these obscene monuments to those who prospered from the mass murder and enslavement of Africans under chattel slavery were now demanding that they come down and that street signs be removed. Luke Samuels who led the statue protest has argued for Dundas Street in Edinburgh and Glasgow be renamed ‘Emancipation Street’ to reflect the fight to abolish slavery. I’m in no doubt that without the BLM moment, Sir Geoff would not have finally been successful in getting Council leader, Adam McVey, to finally install a public information board explaining the change in wording which has now appeared in St Andrew Square.

BLM activists vary about whether these names and statues should come down immediately or whether a public awareness campaign and through the changing the education curriculum - a key demand of protests in June - should take place first so that society gets the full benefit of any discussions about Scotland’s past. Right now, one can easily tell the story because the names of those merchants mean the evidence of slavery is in plain sight. There is a distinct danger that simply taking them all down without placing them in a museum for context or having a properly organised public consultation and wide public awareness campaign will create the conditions for misunderstandings and further round of forgetting.

Not long after the big BLM demo, a shadowy group calling itself ‘Glasgow Youth Arts Collective’ called a demo against the Robert Peel state in George Square - why only the Peel statue we don’t know. No one knew who they were but they associated it with BLM despite not at all being authorised. In the end, they didn’t even turn up but triggered misleading articles in the Murdoch press that provoked a counter demo of far right football hooligans to ‘defend the statues’ which had never been in danger. A few days later the same far right groups were allowed by police to run amok against anti-racist campaigners that were demanding rights for refugees in the wake of the Park Inn hotel tragedy.

I have always stressed that we could get rid of all the statues and street names tomorrow but we would still have institutionalised racism the day after. It is the public education that will start to rid of the often hidden institutions and practices that sustain racialised discrimination. Making these structures and social relations more visible is why anti-racist education is much more important. The many tens of thousands of people who have signed petitions along with BLM Scotland expect Holyrood to implement the demand to amend the Curriculum for Excellence Social Studies benchmarks to include a specific experiences and outcomes measure: ‘I understand Scotland’s historical role in empire, colonialism and transatlantic slavery, and the diversity of Scottish society in the past.’ This key BLM demand for decolonising the Curriculum means junting the Eurocentric white supremacist version of history too often taught in our schools. It is a key demand that needs to be heeded by the Scottish Government and by Holyrood in the very near future.

Graham Campbell is an SNP councillor for Springburn/Robroyston in Glasgow. In 2017, he was elected as Glasgow’s first African Caribbean Councillor and was instrumental in Glasgow City Council holding its first ever official Black History Month. He is Project Leader of ‘Flag Up Scotland Jamaica’ a twinning exchange project formed during the 2014 Commonwealth Games.
Racism and anti-racism in the age of Black Lives Matter

Talat Ahmed surveys the progress made in organising the fight against racial injustice

The current anti-racism protests are unprecedented in my lifetime and probably the largest ever since the late 18th and early 19th centuries. These are the words of Hakim Adi, Professor of History of Africa and the African Diaspora at the University of Chichester, referring to the massive wave of global protests under the banner of Black Lives Matter (BLM) following the killing of the George Floyd on 25 May 2020 in Minneapolis, and how those that took place in the UK compared to the mass abolitionist movement in Britain two centuries before. What made the current anti-racist mobilisation even more phenomenal was that it took place in the middle of a pandemic - according to the Guardian (29 July 2020), some 260 towns and cities had protests in June and early July – from Monmouth in south Wales to Shetland in Scotland. This is clearly more than a moment, and the birth of a new mass movement. In the US, according to the New York Times (3 July 2020), an estimated 15m-26m people participated in the 2020 protests, making BLM one of the largest movements in US history. The movement has advocated to defund the police and invest directly into black communities and alternative emergency response models as well as challenge systemic racism more generally.

The reason racism is systemic is precisely because it is woven into the fabric of our socio-economic system, namely, capitalism. This is particularly apparent in the US, where African-Americans are more than twice as likely to be unemployed than their white counterparts, the net worth of white households is 13 times that of black households and black life expectancy is four years lower than that of white Americans. And in amongst this, there has been a 25-year long period of increasing inequality between blacks and whites.

Keaanga-Yamahtta Taylor’s excellent recent book, From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation, examines the historical and political context in which such grisly encounters as that which led to the murder of George Floyd are routine. She suggests that ‘police murder and brutality are only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the US criminal justice system’ and observes that the ‘US accounts for 5 percent of the world’s population but 25 percent of the world’s prison population’, that there are more than a million African-Americans in prison and that ‘Black people are incarcerated at a rate six times that of Whites.’

It is no surprise either that the BLM movement originally emerged at the tail end of the presidency of Barack Obama, for when it came to institutionalised racism, the record of his two-term administration was deeply depressing. Obama achieved little to arrest the long-term divisions. Black median income fell 11% to $33,500 compared to a 4% drop to $58,000 for whites under Obama. Astonishingly, white median wealth (as opposed to income) was $91,405 compared to just $6,446 for African-American households.

In 1964, the year of the Civil Rights Act, there were just 100 black elected officials across the whole of the country. By 1990, there were over 7,000. Nor were these simply the equivalent of parish councillors. As Taylor observes, ‘African-Americans were handed the keys to some of the largest and most important cities in the country: Los Angeles, Detroit, Atlanta, Chicago, Philadelphia and New York.’ Significantly, between 1970 and 2006, the number of black households earning more than $100,000 increased from 1% to 9%. In short, the civil rights struggle led to the development of a sizeable black middle class who have become part of the political establishment and wider ruling class. The fact that the rallying cry of today’s movement is the rather desperate sounding ‘Black Lives Matter’ speaks volumes. It is a damming indictment of those who have pioneered and profited from the strategy of putting ‘black faces in high places’. This is underlined by the fact that whilst acknowledging the manifest concerns and hurt of BLM protestors, Obama as President was keen to defend the police, condemn any violence on the part of demonstrators and call for respect for laws and their enforcers who discriminate against African-Americans.

That latest uprising of the BLM movement took place amid the current pandemic is not surprising, given COVID-19’s disproportionate impact on Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities. As Gary Younge put it eloquently in the New Statesman (3 June 2020): ‘In the slogan ‘I can’t breathe’... there is the connective tissue between the most brazen forms of state violence and the more banal tribulations of the ailing pandemic patient’. US data suggests that, adjusting for age, black people are 3.6 times more likely to die from Covid-19 than white people; Hispanic/Latinx people are 2.5 times as likely (Ford, Reber and Reeves, ‘Race Gaps in Covid-19 Deaths are even Bigger than They Appear’, Brookings Institute 16 June 2020). Similarly, a UK Office of National Statistics (ONS) study noted that in England and Wales, again adjusting for age, black people are four times more likely than white to die of Covid-19; those of Bangladeshi and Pakistani origin are roughly 3.5 times more likely. Once these figures are further adjusted for ‘region, rural and urban classification, area deprivation, household composition, socio-economic position, highest qualification held, household tenure, and health or disability’, the differences are sharply reduced. However, both black people and those of Bangladeshi or Pakistani origin are still almost twice as likely to die (ONS 7 May 2020) A larger study conducted on behalf of NHS England produced similar results (British Medical Journal 11 May 2020). In other words, a major reason minority groups have suffered more is their propensity to be pushed into deprivation, overcrowded...
housing, densely populated areas and front-line jobs, and to have suffered prior ill health. While this is also true of many white workers, it is disproportionately the case for those from non-white backgrounds.

Systematic racism is also revealed by the jobs that minorities are pushed towards. The authors of the ONS study noted that disproportionately high numbers of people of Bangladeshi or Pakistani origin work as drivers and in transportation. Similarly, Rashawn Ray in a report for the Brookings Institute (9 April 2020) in the US pointed out that black people, who make up about 13% of the US population, ‘represent 30 percent of bus drivers, nearly 20 percent of all food service workers, janitors, cashiers and stockers’.

What has been particularly remarkable and encouraging about the most recent wave of BLM demonstrations is their multiracial nature and character – and also how they have begun to involve the support of organised workers on a level far greater than previously – best seen by the strike for Black Lives protests which took place in the US, where tens of thousands of workers in 160 different cities struck. This included the United Farm Workers union and the Service Employees International Union. In Britain, it has been heartening to see groups of workers join community protests of taking the knee. A particular highlight was one of the first gatherings in Windrush Square, Brixton, which saw the presence of local firefighters taking a knee.

Research by the Pew Centre in the US noted that 31% of white respondents ‘strongly supported’ the BLM movement, with a further 30% ‘somewhat supporting’ it. More tangibly, white people have turned up, linked arms and even placed themselves on the frontline in order to protect Black demonstrators from the tender mercies of the police. There has also been an important international dimension to this solidarity. Right across the world, people have defied curfews and their own anxieties about coronavirus and poured onto the streets. This in turn has reverberated back across the Atlantic and further enriched the protests over there. Speaking at George Floyd’s funeral, Rev Al Sharpton referred to the demonstrators who hurled into Bristol Harbour the statue of slave trader Edward Colston, a tremendous moment of victory which sparked similar developments in American towns and cities. These have not simply been token gestures, but symbolic actions rooted in longer-standing international movements such as Rhodes Must Fall. African-Americans know that the roots of their oppression lie in slavery. Thus, the toppling of Confederate general Albert Pike’s Washington statue is part of a demand to account for the history of those who sought to reinforce racism. The sight of professional footballers taking a knee and sporting BLM on their shirts is an indication of how widespread the protests’ impact has been, and is reminiscent of previous mass anti-racist mobilisations in Britain such as the Anti-Apartheid Movement in the 1980s and also Anti-Nazi League and Rock Against Racism in the 1970s against the fascist National Front in Britain, which permeated deeply into the consciousness of a new young generation of black and white workers.

Like any mass movement, there are ever present dangers of co-option and a retreat from radicalism. From the Premier League to Ben and Jerry’s – almost all institutions now claim to stand for BLM. Even the CEO of the bank JPMorgan Chase took the knee with his staff. This is the very same bank which pushed tens of thousands of poor (and disproportionately black and Latino) Americans into taking subprime mortgages before 2008, only to foreclose on them after the crisis!

In Britain, as elsewhere there is a worrying racist backlash underway against the new movement, and outright racists and fascists (such as ‘Patriotic Alternative’) are mobilising behind the slogan ‘White Lives Matter’. Given the current refugee crisis, rich and powerful Tory politicians are engaged in racist scapegoating to try to deflect public anger away from their disastrous handling of the Covid-19 crisis and onto some of the poorest and most vulnerable people in the world. Unions and the left have a key role to play in challenging the politics of divide and rule. As Satnam Ner, former STUC President has stated, in Scotland we are fortunate to have two annual anti-racist demonstrations: the STUC St Andrew’s Day Anti-Racism March and Rally in November and the international Stand up to Racism demonstrations in March. So, we have a good tradition to build on but it needs to be deepened to go much further.

If the current movement in Britain is to sustain itself, go beyond the achievements of the Civil Rights Movement and start to win meaningful changes in our society then it needs to remain a genuine mass anti-racist movement from below and one that starts to systematically tackle every element of our racist society, from toppling slave owners statues, to tackling institutional discrimination in the justice and education systems. Racism and exploitation in the workplace go hand in hand as the disproportionate deaths of black front line workers in the Covid-19 crisis make all too clear. We need to have robust anti-racist organisations in every town and city, every college, every workplace, on the streets and online in order to both challenge specific injustices, such as defending Debora Kayembe and her family in Bonnyrigg and fighting for justice for Sheku Bayou, to build the kind of mass movement that can destroy the endemic racism at the heart of British society.

Dr Talat Ahmed is a Senior Lecturer in South Asian History at the University of Edinburgh, is a UCU member and is also Convenor of Stand up to Racism Scotland – see https://www.facebook.com/SUTRscot/ and https://twitter.com/sutrscotland

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The monetisation of fossil again?

Annie Morgan examines the issues behind carbon capture, storage and usage bioenergy carbon capture and storage

Though I do not have a background in science or engineering, an honours degree in social sciences has given me the benefit of the skill to conduct research. This has been used to examine evidence for my involvement with various climate action groups, especially with regard to the ramping up of the use of technology for climate damage mitigation, and within a framework of eco-socialism developed by the likes of Barry Commoner in his The Closing Circle book from 1971. His work highlighted the need to look at what is produced in terms of environmentally worthwhile goods and whether the end product is environmentally harmful. John Bellamy Foster has continued to inform eco-socialist theory with this work with his Capitalism’s War on the Earth (2010) which warns of a ‘metabolic rift’. The human estrangement from nature is the central tenet. He argues a focus on techno-fixes without resetting our relationship with nature will not enable a sustainable future.

Contrary to the enthusiasts of technology, there is a lack of consideration of social and environmental aspects in eye wateringly expensive technological fixes. We need to recall Albert Einstein: ‘We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when creating them’.

Carbon capture and storage (CCS) and usage (CCUS) and bio-energy carbon capture and storage (BECCS) are big business in the fossil fuel industry, and are collectively referred to as Negative Emissions Technologies (NETS). One clear example is the promotion of so-called ‘clean energy’. The Tyndall Energy Research Centre, in a report in 2018 called ‘Policy models reliant on NETS technologies’, warned of an over-reliance on these technologies in policy and business models. This is over-reliance is evident in both government strategy – see the newly established Scottish National Investment Bank – and within the responses of some unions.

A report called ‘Climate Vision’ from the University of Exeter in 2015, argued: ‘Overall CCS carries a host of risks and unanswered questions, so needs to be carefully regulated and scrutinised. CCS may be useful in carefully selected sites. However, it is important not to be viewed as a panacea as it does not address the core problem of fossil fuel usage - it simply masks the main problem associated with it which is carbon emissions. There are ways to reduce emissions which carry none of the associated risks’. Applying this to Scotland, the case of St. Fergus stands out. Acorn and Pale Blue Dot are steaming ahead with the misnamed ‘clean energy’ promise of refining gas to blue hydrogen. Blue hydrogen is made from natural gas through the process of steam methane reforming and is not a net zero emission technology because i is not possible to capture all CO2 emissions. Furthermore, it requires methane pipelines with high risk of leakage. Methane is a more potent greenhouse gas than CO2. Millions are being spent on this at present with the 2019 report of the Royal Society of Edinburgh (RSE) called Scotland’s Energy Future predicting that £20-30bn would be needed in scaling up the technology. The strategy has become the central pillar of both Holyrood and Westminster governments industrial and climate change policy. Yet while cautiously welcoming the strategy, the RSE asks for consideration of earthquake potential and leakage.

South of the border, we have the Teesside Collective which is at the forefront of CCUS roll out. Here plastic bottles and fertilisers are produced using US shale gas which is brough over in massively CO2 emitting container ships. But we don’t have to go south of the border for an example closer to home because we have INEOS in Grangemouth which ships slipping through the Firth of Forth with fracked LNG for turning into plastic packaging, and pharmaceuticals. Nearby Queensferry beach is polluted with hundreds of thousands of plastic nurdles ingested by fish.

There are alternative and better ways to achieve the restoration of natural balance. Returning plant diversity to farmland could be key in sustainable pest control and soil restoration. Indigenous practices like aboriginal fire management in Australia could also be important. Closer to home, we have the Viridor/Glasgow City Council recycle plant which is an example of good tech. Contaminated waste is baked, not incinerated and the end product can be used for road fill, construction and clothing. Until we have biodegradable alternatives and a circular economy, this technology plays its part in waste management and, in a globally just world, we would be exporting this technology to South East Asia instead of our rubbish. However, the downside is the public/private partnership used.

Deployment of CCS and CCUS matters because all carbon reductions in Scotland and elsewhere assume that large scale implementation is desirable and possible. BECCS adds another stage to the process. It requires fast growing woody plants, taking out carbon as they grow, chopping them down, burning the biomass to generate energy and then utilizing CCS to store the carbon. A Westminster committee argues 32% of UK production could take place in Scotland. This would scupper any plans for regenerative farming increasing self-sufficiency.

From 1973 The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil play of John McGrath staged by 7:84, we should remember that the ownership of resources is the key to the living conditions of most of us. The monetisation of fossil created the influence of the fossil industry with and beyond governments globally. It is vital that we do not allow the climate mitigation strategies to be monopolised in the same way.

Annie Morgan is a climate activist with ScotE3 and active in local food networks and the climate challenge funded, Gilded Lily. She is member of the Unite union retired section.
Desperately seeking social democracy in Scotland

George Kerevan says a grassroots revolt is needed to make the SNP stand by what it says it is for

Some on the left define the SNP as a ‘bourgeois nationalist’ party. If so, the Scottish working class has suffered one of the gravest defeats in its history. The latest polls show support for the party at 57% (after 13 years in office) and Scottish Labour slumped to a pathetic 14%. Even then, around 44% of Labour voters say they will support independence in a second referendum.

Ideologically, the SNP is better described as a reformist, social democratic party of the moderate centre left. True, the party started life after WW1 as a radical petty bourgeois movement. But the modern SNP emerged from the 1970s onwards as a popular response to nuclear weapons, deindustrialisation and Thatcherism, eventually attracting many disgruntled Labour Party members and supporters (such as myself) in the Blair era. It is insane to classify SNP luminaries such as Margo MacDonald, Jim Sillars, Jimmy Reid, Stephen Maxwell or Tommy Shepard as dupes of bourgeois nationalism.

That said, it is clear that during its 13 years in government the SNP has accommodated to capital, just as much as Labour leaderships have done. The essence of post-war social democracy everywhere is to promote Western capitalism as (ostensibly) the most efficient model of wealth creation, while ensuring consent by using the welfare system to ameliorate the worst excess of the free market. Latterly, ‘modernising’, Blair-style social democracy has become a cheerleader for neo-liberalism and then for austerity, as the global system grows more unstable.

The SNP fits directly into this managerial model of social democracy. Under Alex Salmond, the party adopted neo-liberal Ireland as its model, advocated low corporate taxes as a magnet for foreign investment, and welcomed Donald Trump International to Aberdeenshire. At the same time, Salmond’s early administration abolished prescription charges and student fees, mitigated the ‘bedroom’ tax, froze council tax and held down social rents. As a result, poverty levels are lower in Scotland than in England.

However, the balance the SNP government keeps between accommodating capital and offering concessions to the working class has begun to shift in favour of the former, particularly since Nicola Sturgeon took over. In part, this is due to the financial squeeze imposed on Holyrood by the Tories. Sturgeon’s administration has tried to hold the line, introducing the ‘baby box’, ending period poverty, and providing grants for young carers. But valuable as these developments are, the financial straight jacket imposed by the Treasury means any reforms are limited.

The alternative is to take direct control of the economy. Instead, the SNP Government has chosen to rely on private sector investment to boost growth. This has led to questionable compromises. Scotland’s single biggest food export is factory-farmed salmon. Most production is controlled by Norwegian-owned multinational, Mowi, which uses dangerous insecticides to kill the parasitic sea lice common in intensive salmon cultivation. Yet Cabinet Secretary, Roseanna Cunningham, has consistently refused demands from environmentalists to investigate Mowi.

You can see this drift in the first report from the Just Transition Commission, set up last year by the Scottish Government to show it is doing something about climate change. In print, the Commission’s tone is radical: ‘Here in Scotland, we need to put social justice at the heart of our actions as we build the climate movement and mobilise for COP26 …’. However, Scottish Government was careful to include among the genuine environmental activists on the Commission representatives of Big Oil. They include Colette Cohen, Chief Exec of the Oil & Gas Technology Centre (OGTC) in Aberdeen and a 14-year veteran at Connoco-Phillips. While working in Kazakhstan, Cohen was awarded a medal in recognition of her ‘contribution to the country’s oil and gas industry’. Cohen’s OGTC wants to maximise oil recovery using new technology, funded by £180m from the UK and Scottish governments.

Buried deep in the Transition Commission’s fiery but ultimately vague report is a commitment to help OGTC deliver more oil to ‘protect jobs’. Such is the ultimate contradiction of social democracy - talking reform while accepting the rule of capital. This suggest the SNP grassroots need to reassert their right to make party policy and, after independence, the first task will be to build a party that represents the interests of the working class.

George Kerevan is co-convenor of the SNP Socialists

Other examples of the too cosy relations developing between ministers and capital include Richard Lochhead’s refusal to shut down Exxon-Shell’s dangerously obsolete plastics complex at Mossmorran, whose flaring of natural gas makes the plant Scotland’s second biggest emitter of CO2, and the £60m grant to Nuveen, the world’s biggest commercial property owner, to subsidise its ugly hotel and shopping development on Leith Walk.

An independent, socialist Scotland will have to deal with the global economy to survive. But subsidising US capital or allowing global agribusiness to destroy Scotland’s natural habitat is taking pragmatism too far. Worse, the Sturgeon administration has started to accommodate to domestic capital. As head of her advisory group on rebooting the economy after Covid-19, she appointed Benny Higgins, the former boss of Tesco Bank turned chair of Buccleuch Estates. Higgins also advised on setting up the new Scottish National Investment Bank and on the proposed National Infrastructure Company (an idea endorsed by the SNP conference). In the latter case, Higgins has called on Sturgeon to veto the idea lest it compete with private builders.

Higgins represents something new: the integration of Scottish business directly into Scottish Government decision-making, much as Gordon Brown recruited bankers like Fred Goodwin. This managerialism is in line with the increasing bureaucratising of the SNP and recruitment of MSPs and ministers from a self-perpetuating caste of former advisers. But bringing business representatives into government leads to conflicts of interest and sleaze. The SNP also wants business people onboard as part of its overtures to reassure middle class voters that independence will change as little as possible – that assumes SNP voters in the housing schemes are stupid.

Socialists

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Calling the troops to the field of battle in a longer war

Jim Sillars thinks through the stages and issues in the struggle for independence

I start by not apologising for being pedantic. We have to plan to get an overwhelming majority in Holyrood to get a referendum on independence, and plan for the fact that even when we win it, we don’t get independence next day, and will still have much to do.

There is not one but five stages to achieving independence. These are: 1) building support; 2) getting a super majority MSPs into Holyrood next May with a mandate for a referendum; 3) levering a Section 30 (S30) order out of Westminster; 4) placing before the people the reasons for a ‘Yes’ vote in the referendum; and 5) negotiations on a Scottish-UK treaty that brings independence. Stages 4 and 5 might seem a bit down the road, but stage 4 is crucial to winning a referendum, and stage 5 is crucial to much that will mould an independent Scotland for many years to come. The independence movement should be working on them now.

If the latest (August) polling at 55% for independence is to be believed, then we are doing well in stage 1. Is it sustainable and solid enough to build the vote higher? It would be prudent to doubt the polls, because they are taken in an unusual period when the Westminster governmental system is seen as grossly incompetent in dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic, and when Nicola Sturgeon’s presentation skills show the superiority of the Scottish education system that formed her, compared with the ‘ers,’ umns,’ and ‘ahs’ that Etonian Boris Johnson requires before he can choose a word or phrase that has meaning. (Please note the past tense about the Scottish education system.)

The problem with polls taken in mid-2020 asking if the interviewees will vote for independence is that they are under no pressure, because there is no decision, no vote now to be cast right now. It is, of course, heartening to find independence ahead in the polls, but we have to avoid the danger of believing they reflect reality in the surreal world that Covid-19 has created. But saying that, we have to be aware also of another aspect of the polls that is positive: an important influence in the battle between us and the Unionists (north and south) is about who is in the political ascendancy; and it is noticeable that these polls have seriously damaged the Unionists’ belief in their potential to hold off independence.

Before leaving the polls and stage 1, we should ask two questions: if true, is the support they indicate based on the performance of the SNP Government? Or has the blundering incompetence of the Johnson government burst the myth that Scotland, for its salvation, has to shelter under the powerful umbrella of the UK? There is a difference between those two. If the latter, then it is independence per se, irrespective of how a nationalist government performs, that matters. We must hope it is the latter, because if it is the performance of the former, it would not be hard for a decent Labour opposition to demolish the SNP government’s reputation before next May’s elections.

It is that SNP governmental performance that worries me when considering how, in stage 2, we get that overwhelming majority next May. Richard Leonard, like John Swinney, is an eminently decent chap; but like John is not fit for purpose. Everyone in politics knows that to be the case, and as Labour in Scotland is still only a branch of British Labour, we should anticipate change will be imposed. Starmer will need to act, because without a resurgent Labour party in Scotland, he cannot win the next general election, and he cannot win four years hence if next May Labour is reduced to a rump, if it is lucky.

That leads to the most pertinent question in stage 2 - will the independence movement put all its eggs in the SNP basket next May? That would not be sensible. The SNP will put its main effort into defending its constituency seats, ‘hoping’ to pick up List seats which will be few if it succeeds in its primary effort.

That is where the idea of an independence alliance standing on the List, in strategically picked regions, becomes sensible. It should be able to get SNP voters’ second votes, pick up List seats and swell the number of MSPs with a referendum mandate That, of course, requires the SNP to act as part of the broad movement, not from a narrow party position, and withdraw from those strategic List regions.

Is the SNP leadership big enough to acknowledge that it is now, unlike in the fallow years, only part of a movement, and has to take into account the views of others on how best to fight next May’s elections? If the objective of success is met in stage 2, then there is the question of plan B in stage 3 if Westminster says no to a S30. This is absorbing much time and debate, which I think will not be necessary if we get that overwhelming majority in Holyrood. There are clear signs that the London government knows it will not be able to sustain a ‘No’ in the face of others on how best to fight next May’s elections?

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Jim Sillars is a former Labour and SNP MP and is currently writing his memoirs.
Reflections on democracy, diktat and despotism in the SNP

Kenny MacAskill argues all is not well in the house of the SNP if it is to lay the foundations for independence

Trenchant debate’s normal in politics. Parties and movements are broad churches with passionate beliefs and critical issues adding to the mix. The SNP’s iron discipline over recent years was in many ways an aberration, coming about through factors from the election of its first ever administration, to the delivery of a referendum. But time moved on and the terrain shifted. In years gone by when Labour dominated Scotland, much of Scottish politics took place within it or the wider Labour movement. Debates there were often robust but were fundamental for the success of the cause.

Now the SNP has supplanted Labour and the constitution has become the major political issue. It’s, therefore, perfectly understandable that it’s within the SNP, along with the wider ‘Yes’ movement that much debate takes place. Hopes within Unionist circles that it’s indicative of disintegration are wishful thinking. More surprising though have been calls from within the SNP almost demanding the closing down of debate or seeking to constrain actions across the wider nationalist movement. That’s more indicative of a fear of debate or a concern about losing control. The SNP cannot be the political equivalent of some strict Presbyterian sect, simply chouring the chants of the precentor. The scale of the party now, let alone the nationalist movement, makes that a fundamentally inappropriate in a membership-based party, as well as a democracy. Moreover, there are issues to discuss, and not just policy required, to win the next referendum. Recent actions or inactions can neither be ignored nor brushed aside, otherwise the movement will be weakened, and individuals lost to the cause. Openness is required and debate accordingly is both necessary and healthy.

The Scottish Parliament’s Salmond inquiry will unfold, and will have ramifications for SNP HQ, as well as senior officials within the Scottish Government. That’s as it should be. Probity is demanded as well as administrative competence expected in senior office, whether in government or party. It’ll be for the Holyrood committee to report but it’s hard to see how there won’t be casualties. The suggestion, or solace, perhaps sought by some, that this was a British civil service conspiracy was always fanciful. The fingerprints of senior party officials are all over this, and truth will out.

There’ll be turbulence but clearing the air is essential, as the party prepares for the next move forward. More worrying for many party members has been the political inertia from SNP HQ along with machinations more akin to political chicanery. It’s been that latter aspect which has fueled most recent anger, especially the hatchet job on Joanna Cherry.

For the SNP has long prided itself on being a membership-based party where delegates decided and where bloc votes were disdained. Yet it appears that some groups have been accorded membership rights without any direct election by members. Some of these groups appear to have more interest in promoting their own narrow agenda than in pursuing the cause of independence.

Compounding that has been the flagrant Tammany Hall-style politics that were correctly derided by the SNP when it applied in other parties. Seeing individuals take decisions promoting their own self-interest whilst deliberately harming others has brought the NEC into contempt and put HQ in the spotlight.

Realisation of the outrage caused saw a roll back with James Dornan being re-instated, but the underlying anger remains and must be addressed. Many of those involved in those machinations are now seeking to parachute themselves into Holyrood seats. Shamefully, at the time that they were blocking others, they were preparing their media launches. They might find that they’ll be met with the contempt they deserve by local members.

For underpinning all the discontent has been a growing despair at the failure of SNP HQ to prepare for Indyref2. Even flagrant sins would be pardoned by some if progress was being made toward the Holy Grail. But instead, it’s been moribundity that’s prevailed. Whilst these individuals were preparing their news releases peppering every sentence with the word ‘independence’, they were presiding over a leadership doing little if anything to progress it.

As the SNP vote has increased and support for independence likewise, the case for it hasn’t been getting built in equal proportions. Rather than stitching up selection ballots, members were rightly expecting preparations were begun to achieve and win Indyref2. Polls are favorable and the British state is in turmoil under an incompetent administration. But no one underestimates the scale of the challenge that remains or the onslaught that will be launched in the future. That’s why there’s underlying anger and frustration.

Instead, we been presented with a self-satisfied parroting of opinion poll results rather than laying the groundwork for the real test to come. The Growth Commission was belated in its delivery and is now outdated in its content. And neither the issues that were pivotal in Indyref1 in 2014 such as currency and pensions nor the new ones post-Brexit of relations with the EU and borders have been addressed. That many see as not just negligent but criminal.

December 2019’s election changed the political situation, but SNP strategy hasn’t adjusted to accordingly. Even the minor genuflexion to a constitutional convention has stalled. Coronavirus makes things difficult, but Ireland has still managed to negotiate a coalition government. Those are the reasons that there’s anger amongst members and change is being demanded by many. Debate there must be but most importantly policies must be prepared and strategy evolved for the coming challenges.

Kenny MacAskill has been the SNP MP for the East Lothian since 2019. Previously, he was a SNP MSP from 1999 to 2016. He was Cabinet Secretary for Justice in the Scottish Government from 2007 until 2014.
Putting Scottish Labour back on track

Tommy Kane argues Labour can resolve its constitutional carry-on to allow its radical politics to shine through

Nicola Sturgeon is right. Next year’s Scottish Parliamentary elections are as important as any election Scotland has faced. For many, the election will be about another referendum and independence. For others, like me, the election offers a chance to present a vision of a post-Covid society under an enhanced devolution settlement – and a Scottish Parliament that uses all its powers; creates a wealth tax and invests in our people, communities and public services; defends and generates jobs; and tackles the climate crisis while promoting a green industrial revolution (as set out in the 2019 Labour manifesto).

The problem is that increasing numbers of Scots are convinced that the first step towards that progress requires constitutional change and Scottish independence. The next problem is if Scotland does become independent, it will make all of those things more difficult to achieve. Nonetheless, as recent polls show, support for independence is growing and it’s not difficult to understand why. Johnson was a gift to the SNP pre-Covid. Now, with his shambolic, haphazard and ‘eugenic’ style approach to the crisis, he has become its biggest asset.

Yet the current level of support is still remarkable. Notwithstanding its abysmal record pre-covid the SNP has also presided over a Covid fiasco and its main defence appears to be: ‘Aye - but at least we are no’ as bad as England’. The approach to care homes verges on criminal neglect, and it was as under-prepared as the Tories for the catastrophe. The SQA shambles has left an indelible scar on Scotland’s school pupils, parents and teachers, and exposed the cross-class alliance that the SNP is with its shameful record on Scottish inequalities in health, wealth and income – which it has done nothing to address in its near 14 years in office.

Where is Labour in all of this? Under Corbyn, there was recognition that you can oppose independence for solid social and economic reasons but to perpetually oppose a referendum ultimately plays into the SNP’s hands. To perpetually oppose a referendum and independence for Scots to decide their future then we can get on with presenting our socialist vision for a better Scotland with a progressive agenda. Quarrelling over the constitution suits them, entrenching their support and diverting attention from their respective failures at Holyrood and Westminster. But for Labour to be heard on those other issues, it needs to have an approach to the question of indyref2 and independence that speaks to ‘yes’ and - not just – ‘no’ voters. So, oppose independence, make clear a referendum and more constitutional instability are not what Scotland needs but make clear that this is a decision to be made in Scotland not at Westminster. This would at least get the respect of existing and former Labour voters.

Richard Leonard, as a socialist, rightly talks about jobs, housing, the right to food, a National Care Service, a fairer economy, workers’ ownership and a green new deal - an agenda he recently outlined in an excellent keynote speech. The SNP and Tories have no intention of entering into this conversation, let alone piggy backing onto such a progressive agenda. Quarrelling over the constitution suits them, entrenching their support and diverting attention from their respective failures at Holyrood and Westminster.

But for Labour to be heard on those other issues, it needs to have an approach to the question of indyref2 and independence that speaks to ‘yes’ and - not just – ‘no’ voters. So, oppose independence, make clear a referendum and more constitutional instability are not what Scotland needs but make clear that this is a decision to be made in Scotland not at Westminster. This would at least get the respect of existing and former Labour voters.

Now is the time for Labour to stop the phoney war around indyref2, stop focusing on process, and play a long game. If not, the SNP will continue to stoke grievance, citing anti-democratic tendencies in both the Tories and Labour, with little attention being paid to the substance of independence itself.

Labour should take on the substantive arguments on independence, pointing out how the shortfall between spend and revenue, meeting requirements of a new currency and getting the public finances in order through ‘significant restraint’ in public spending will see an independent Scotland experience prolonged austerity - a reality the SNP’s own ‘Growth Commission’ report recognised.

This means making clear working class people will pay the price via wage cuts, declining public services, pensions jeopardised, sweetheart deals with foreign investors (with eroding worker’s pay and conditions being the quid pro quo) that the SNP see as central in driving an independent Scotland, and how they may experience a hard border with England if Scotland joins the EU.

Most importantly, Labour must come up with a constitutional position that says it understands the status quo is not working while presenting a positive vision of the augmentation of the powers of the Scottish Parliament within a radically reconfigured federal Britain intent on the redistribution of wealth and power, and how Labour governments at Westminster and Holyrood offer greater potential for progress than an independent Scotland does.

Richard Leonard has already said much of this – and actually indyref2 aside, the paper (much of which came from Corbyn commissioned work) that came out of Scottish Labour’s recent contentious Executive Committee meeting laid out much of the positive thinking on radical federalism and additional powers for the Scottish Parliament. But Keir Starmer needs to urgently get himself to Scotland and say this alongside Richard Leonard. Despite the promises made about radical federalism and a constitutional convention, Starmer has gone AWOL on this agenda. And instead, is currently giving the impression he wants to gain the acceptance of the vested interests of the British state, rather than challenge them through the creation of a new federal state.

Starmer won’t win Scotland if he does not set out a positive Labour vision for Scotland. He won’t appeal to the ‘yes’ voters, which is vital, if he adorns himself in the Union Jack, takes a hard-line approach to another referendum and puts the ‘Better Together’ band back together.

However, first and foremost, Labour needs to get out the undemocratic bind of the talk of blocking another referendum. If Labour makes one simple addition to its recent Executive Committee Paper and make clear it is for Scots to decide their future then we can get on with presenting our socialist vision for a better Scotland with a chance of being heard.

Tommy Kane is the former adviser (for Scotland) to Jeremy Corbyn

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From independence to Corbyn and back again to independence

Stella Rooney explains her changing perspective on her campaigning priorities

In 2014, I was inspired to take political action for the first time. Aged fifteen, I was full of hope about what the future could look like and what role young people like myself could have in shaping it. To myself and many other young people, the referendum was our chance to prevent a large black cloud from forming over our futures. A once in a generation opportunity to end Trident missiles, the monarchy and create a country run ‘for the millions, not the millionaires.’

Bourgeoisie parliamentary politics does not give working class people many opportunities to feel like our voices are significant. Perhaps, I should feel privileged to have experienced this more than once, first in 2014 and again on two occasions when voting for Jeremy Corbyn as prime minister. While each had their limitations, both the cases for independence and a democratic socialist Britain presented contrasting routes to a common goal - establishing a way of ordering a country which doesn’t punish the poor.

For all their differences and attendant disagreements, I’d argue these two moments shared much in common; for many they represented a break from politics as usual. Both independence in 2014 and the election of Corbyn as leader, were in their own way responses to a crisis of faith in the conventional tools of governance. Indyref saw thousands register and vote for the very first time. I spoke to many people on doorsteps, deeply disenfranchised from politics yet voting for independence because it signified a rare opportunity for change. Corbyn’s leadership also saw many of those who had been similarly disenfranchised join Labour in their hundreds of thousands.

Speaking frankly, marking a ballot box rarely has much of an effect on our wages, our bills or quality of life. Independence and a Corbyn government offered something different - the chance to vote for something which is not devoid of meaning.

In 2014, many of us felt that Scotland had changed forever, yet we have seen very little material improvement to the lives of working-class people since the referendum. The SNP has even become a barrier to change, with recent cases of its opposition to sectoral collective bargaining in the care sector and legal protections for tenants illustrating this starkly. Since the referendum, many attempts have been made to sanitise the independence proposition or to make it more attractive to Scottish capital. We must be clear that any independence worth having must center upon the people of Scotland, not the SNP’s corporate donors.

Reflecting on recent losses for the left is a depressing task, but after allowing a little time to lick our wounds, it is important for us to view the struggles to come with a critical but not cynical eye. The goal of the left, for working class people and our communities to be able to shape the world in our class interest, remains our most significant political task.

We must remember that voting is not the only way the working class can resist. Our primary means of self-defence is in the workplace and in the community, territories in which trade and tenant unions have made serious headway over the past few years. For the third year running, trade and tenant union membership has increased. The coronavirus pandemic has also seen a multitude of workers in Scotland turning to collectivism, realising that our best defence is each other. There is a growing and renewed consensus in Scotland’s workplaces and communities that concludes that power will not be handed to us: instead, we will have to organise and fight for justice ourselves.

It brings me no joy to see Labour’s continued opposition to a second referendum. Socialists must express clear democratic principles, regardless of how we would personally vote in such a referendum.

The right to a referendum is now supported across the union movement, explicitly by unions such as Unison, but also at a branch and workplace level. The unions are listening to sustained calls for democracy, but it is also time we interrogated the prospect of independence itself.

The people of Scotland deserve a politics which engages us all in building the kind of country we want to live in. This does not mean being under any illusions about the solutions offered by a market-oriented vision of independence. However, the short comings of the SNP make independence a neo-liberal proposition only if our movement fails to intervene and interrogate the current situation.

A second referendum is no a quick fix to unregulated capitalism, yet countless elections have showed that Scotland does not want to be governed by Tories. Independence holds opportunities for collectivism to flourish, a chance for trade union freedom and to build an economy which enshrines dignity. As trade unionists, we understand that when workers collective, we can shape the world around us. We must apply our commitment to worker’s self-determination, the right to organise and the power of a collective, to the institutions of the state that govern us.

Becoming an adult in the shadow of the referendum has taught me that disappointment is sadly a prerequisite of being on the left. Yet the struggle continues, and we must never forget how electrifying it feels for ordinary people to be so close to power. The left must build a strategy which allows the workers of Scotland to shape the country we live in, and this means our worker’s movement must consider independence as a serious option.

Stella Rooney is a union activist and the chair of Unite Young Members Scotland. She is also a former member of the Labour Party and former Momentum activist.
Let the purges begin: Corbyn, alleged anti-Semitism and Labour

Chris Sutherland analyses the lasts contours of the one of the most successful political campaign of recent years

H as reporter John Ware’s BBC Panorama programme, ‘Is Labour Anti-Semitic’ (broadcast 10 July 2019), effectively triggered a split and possible purge of the Labour left? Keir Starmer’s decision not to contest a High Court action by seven former staffers of the party’s ‘Governance and Legal Unit’ is important for two reasons. First, he can draw a line against four years of accusations of anti-Semitism. Second, we might never know the truth of what went on in party HQ (2015-2018), of which the ‘disputes team’ may have been just one facet.

Corbyn described Starmer’s decision as ‘political rather than legal’ and for that he faces being sued by John Ware and the former Labour general secretary, Iain McNicol, who ran party HQ at the time. A legal defence fund by Corbyn grassroots supporters has raised over £300,000 in its first week so there is plenty of ground-swell support. Len McCluskey described the reputed £500,000 pay-out to former staffers as a misuse of party funds. Starmer positioned it as a re-booting of the party ‘under new management’. The staffers portrayed themselves as victims of Corbyn’s interference and for allowing space for anti-Semites to flourish. Corbyn supporters pointed to a leaked 850-page Labour Party Governance and Legal Unit into chaos. The EHRC involvement was triggered by anti-Semitic allegations against the party by the Jewish Labour Movement (JLM) and the Campaign Against Anti-Semitism (CAA). The EHRC has powers to identify matters of illegality where provisions of the Equality Act have been breached and can issue Section 21 Notices to enforce recommendations. A hostile EHRC report would have significant implications for Labour. One would be to withdraw the party whip from Corbyn himself, casting him into the wilderness as an independent. And what then? Do the left follow or do they stay? Or will they be pushed?

Somewhere between the interface of the three reports (NEC/Forde/EHRC) is a looming crisis for the Labour left. The timing doesn’t help Corbyn because the Forde inquiry will come months after the EHRC has come and gone, the staffers long forgotten and the anti-Semitic smear campaign having done its job. To add insult to injury, the John Ware Panorama programme has been nominated for a BAFTA! Where does that leave the impartiality of the BBC? The BBC knew all about John Ware. ‘Is Labour Anti-Semitic?’ was the third such anti-Corbyn broadcast identified by the Media Reform Coalition (MRC) which wrote: ‘Handing two editions to the same presenter with known (and hostile) political views on Corbyn without seeking to offer a counter-pose perspective is hardly a ringing endorsement of the BBC’s commitment to due impartiality’.

W are himself had written for the right-wing ‘Standpoint’ describing Corbyn as ‘a Labour leader whose entire political career has been stimulated by disdain for the west, appeasement of extremism and who would barely understand what fighting for the revival of British values is really all about’. Ware has never been a neutral observer. In March 2020, he was part of a consortium which bought the fiercely anti-Corbyn Jewish Chronicle. Squawkbox has detailed a succession of Ware’s Islamophobic work, accusing one pro-Palestinian charity of being a front for terrorism (‘Faith, Hate and Charity’ 2006) in which the BBC was forced to pay undisclosed damages and was criticised by the Islamic Human Rights Commission and Muslim Council of Britain.

W are’s ‘Is Labour Anti-Semitic?’ received a record number of complaints – 1,593 within a two week period. It was Labour’s statement prior to the broadcast about the staffers being ‘disaffected former staff ... with personal and political axes to grind’ that led to the 2020 defamation case in the High Court. Labour was given just a few days’ notice of the programme with just one spokesman, a shaky Shadow Communities Secretary, Andrew Gwynne, against a succession of ‘talking head’ witnesses, each affirming the narrative of Corbyn’s alleged interference in the Unit’s affairs and for being responsible for a mass outbreak of anti-Semitism, much of it assumed or associative, cleverly edited and packaged, backed by the BBC’s full resources.

First, the eight staffers: whistleblowers, vulnerable, filmed against a studio backcloth, soft-lighting and background music. Then eight more unnamed and unattributed witnesses, backed up by commentary from two writer-historians. An ordinary member of the public watching the hour-long ‘special’ would have been hard-pressed to spot the tricks!

But gradually facts have emerged. The Canary (James Wright’s ‘Almost all the sources ...’ 11 August 2019) reported that eight of the un-attributed ‘talking heads’ were well known senior officers of the JLM, two of whom had featured prominently in Al Jazeera’s 4-part expose ‘The Lobby’ of 2016. It was later proved that one of the staffer’s, Ben Westerman, had lied on camera about being asked if he was ‘from Israel’ during a trip to Liverpool Riverside Constituency Labour Party (CLP) - the actual conversation had been recorded. Ware forgot to tell his audience that the two writer historians were Alan Johnson, a senior figure at BICOM (Britain Israel Communications & Research Centre) and Dave Rich, Head of Policy at CST (Community Support Trust).

W are failed to mention a crucial context in the resignation of the ‘staffers’ in 2017. In the process of leaving, they had destroyed thousands of documents of ‘live’ cases, throwing the work of the Governance and Legal Unit into chaos. The programme describes cars arriving
in the dead of night from Corbyn’s office to pick up files without mentioning that Corbyn staff had had to be diverted to try and get the files back into some kind of order. A staffer had taken copies of the destroyed files which were then leaked to the Times breaching the confidentiality of the members being investigated.

Nor was there any mention of the Governance and Legal Unit’s refusal to implement the 2016 Chakrabarti Report recommending a graduated system of sanctions for alleged offenders of anti-Semitism. Most of the primary evidence is contained in the leaked NEC Report but which has been kept from the public eye.

Ware then selectively cropped an email by Corbyn’s adviser, Seumas Milne in order to give an anti-Corbyn slant. The veteran Ware would have known exactly what he was doing during editing. The interspersion of historic footage of Corbyn on pro-Palestinian platforms followed similar lines of ‘associative proof’ of support for terrorism, ignoring his life-long condemnation of all political violence. Similarly, footage of the London demonstration against Israel’s 2014 war on Gaza implied the ‘left’s’ intrinsic anti-Semitism rather than spontaneous anger at the slaughter of civilians by Israeli forces (2,310 killed, 10,895 wounded including 3,374 children).

Liverpool Riverside CLP was never allowed tell its side of the story. It was forced to accept a top-down re-organisation, its chair, John Davies, suspended for three months, later reinstated and cleared of all charges. Yet out of a 2,500 membership only one had actually been disciplined for anti-Semitism. The story of Liverpool Riverside CLP is the subject of a report by ‘Jewish Voices for Labour’ (JVL): ‘The Riverside Scandal’ (16 October 2019) which gives a fascinating insight into how a witch-hunt starts and escalates and the unequal balance of forces of the respective sides.

By any journalistic standards ‘Is Labour Anti-Semitic?’ was a highly, selective, partisan programme which now sits at the axis of a potentially major shift in the country’s second major political party. The BBC should be having a long, hard look at itself. When a broadcaster starts shaping national politics, we all have a problem.

There is anti-Semitism in the Labour Party just as there is in society as a whole, though figures suggest a small fraction of the party, less than 1% of the membership and it’s even higher in parties to the right of Labour. For cross party comparison of anti-Semitism, there are interesting comparative statistics presented by the Campaign Against Anti-Semitism (CAA)’s Annual Anti-Semitism Barometer and by the Institute of Jewish Policy Research. Few observers would deny the racism of the East London Mural ‘False Profits’ by Mear One, or the foolish statement by Naz Shah, for which she profusely apologised. Name-calling, tropes on world conspiracies, holocaust denial, racial stereotyping, trolling on social media, attacks against people, property, graves and synagogues – these are all racist crimes. Party members found guilty of this should rightly be expelled.

So what now? Probably, but not immediately, elements of the left, together with Jeremy Corbyn will be purged. If the party whip is withdrawn from Corbyn following the EHRC report, there’s bound to be a reaction. It’s difficult to second-guess if anyone will follow him, or whether this will presage a major split or outright civil war. Corbyn now faces at least two more legal actions by Ware and McNicol. What a sad reflection of the days when Corbyn was elected Labour Leader, against all the odds, not once but twice, all those mass rallies during the heady days of the 2017 general election, all that hope for a renewed and fairer society, now evaporating before our eyes. The privateers are massing, the neo-liberals and soft-Tories are back in charge. The left is bracing itself. All that hope, now awaiting its day in court.

Maybe, just maybe, it’s time for the Labour left to split, form its own party and start afresh – if only for ideological clarity, out of political honesty if nothing else. Labour only works when the right is in control. The left will always face the full hostility of the establishment and party bureaucracy. It was an illusion that it could simply take over the machinery of the party and hope it would work for it. The staffers weren’t neutral. They preferred Labour’s defeat to Corbyn’s success. The labour movement is long overdue re-alignment for the modern world, for climate change, for the challenges of post-pandemic society. Does the left really want to go on with the old ways, repeating the same mistakes? History proves time and again that Labour fails the working class.

Ralph Miliband wrote a book about it: Parliamentary Socialism: a study in the politics of Labour’ (Merlin, 1964). Pity his sons took no notice of it!

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The Jimmy Reid Foundation

New paper: Learning left lessons: reconstructing economy and society in the post-pandemic period

In late July, the Foundation published its second short collective paper on learning lessons from the pandemic. In the first paper, we contended that not only must a move to returning to ‘business as usual’ be resisted but that an opportunity has also opened up to create a new ‘common sense’ or ‘national consensus’, certainly at the ideological and political levels to achieve a more just and fair economy and society. In this vein, we continue with this new paper which examines issues not touched upon in the first paper. Each section is written by a member of the Foundation’s Project Board of the Foundation. These are:

i) Public ownership and the common good – Professor Andrew Cumbers, Glasgow University
ii) A Scottish Care Service – Dave Watson, secretary, Socialist Health Association Scotland
iii) School education in Scotland – Larry Flanagan, general secretary, EIS union
iv) Employment relations and employment law – Stephen Deans, regional officer, UNITE
v) Union membership – Professor Gregor Gall, University of Leeds

Abbie Archer makes the case for a radical decentralisation of decision-making to stimulate popular participation

Direct democracy in the municipality

very couple of years, people gather in a variety of places to vote for who will represent them in government. This is, for the vast majority of people, their closest interaction with the public decision-making bodies that rule their lives. Even in the case of activism, barring referendums called at the will of the authorities, the average person has little influence in the policy and decision-making processes that govern their lives. This disconnect of a top-down authority from the electorate produces a collection of reactions. One is apathy - ‘My vote doesn’t matter’ - which only results in giving increased power to those who do vote. Another is populism - ‘Candidate X will fix everything’ - which results either in disappointment or power being centralised in one person for their own gain. Finally, there is anger – ‘The Clowncil are idiots’ - which only produces angry internet comments.

What then is the alternative? I believe that the alternative is more democracy in a decentralized and direct form. To explain this, I will concentrate on Scotland and the municipality, but the ideas laid out herein could be applied, and have been applied, to other contexts and situations. Following the ideas and writings of Murray Bookchin, I will focus on the municipality because no other level of government seems to elicit as much disdain and no other level affects the everyday lives of its citizens as much.

First, there are some popular myths to be addressed about direct democracy. Direct democracy’s image in the popular imagination is rather strawman-ish, producing images of Athenian Democracy, an exaggerated version of the Swiss Landsgemeinde or an insecure electronic vote. These are not what I have in mind when I think of direct democracy. Athenian democracy was heavily exclusionary, a Landsgemeinde on the scale of a city like Edinburgh would be highly impractical, and electronic voting is very open to manipulation.

One of the most common arguments against direct democracy is that people aren’t interested, can’t handle politics, or can’t take politics seriously. This is untrue. Even the ‘apolitical’ get impassioned from time to time about matters as wide ranging as potholes and foreign wars. In the media, there is a clear passion for politics that does not merely well up during polls. It can even drive people to violence. People are already political, so let’s give them an arena to express these views and opinions in – and one that leads to active participation not sullen by-standing.

What I propose is a bottom-up system of decision making based around human scaled direct democracy which encourages active participation in the policy and decision making of one’s community. But first, let’s define the community. The term, community, can be applied to a wide range of things. However, here I’d like to concentrate on the spatial dimension, namely, geography. One’s community in this sense includes where people live with their families and neighbours, work, play, and acquire the things needed for their lives. It’s their neighbourhood and the people therein. This has few clear boundaries. The smallest political unit under the current system is the council ward, which for me includes parts that I would describe as ‘my area’ as well as parts that I would not. The best definition I can give to a ‘community’ therefore, is the place where one lives alongside their neighbours, where they live their daily lives. It is here that one interacts with matters the most, the point where their soles touch the ground.

This is smaller than the ward and is not limited to the city. It can include a town or part of a town, a village, or a collection of small villages and hamlets. I wish to label this the ‘baile’ (Bahl-leh).

I give it this name not merely because of its Gaelic cultural association but because of what is implied in the meaning, this is your village, and it is here that the baile assembly shall be held.

The baile assembly will be an assembly of the people who live in the baile. There, issues can be raised, debates and votes held, and decisions made. The baile assembly should be open to all residents who wish to attend and should be as accessible as possible. It should not be made difficult for anyone to attend regardless of who they are. If people are discriminated against by means of access, it skews the assembly and its decisions. As long as one lives in the baile, and is of voting age, one has the right to attend. A suitable venue should be decided on to allow for as many people to attend as possible, as long as it is accessible to all of the community. If it is not fully accessible, it is neither radical or revolutionary.

The reason I believe the assembly should be, as much as it can be, done in person is simple: it is to allow for debate, for all cases to be made amongst the concerned populace, and also to humanise the fellow members of the baile assembly in the eyes of the citizens. When you see and hear the people that your vote is affecting, it is much harder to vote against your fellow citizens. Therefore, to hold an assembly in person, as much as possible, is important simply for the fact that it is important to de-anonymise the community and remind the citizens that they are voting for the greater good of the community.

Assembly attendance shouldn’t be mandatory. Instead, the agenda for the week’s meeting should be publicly and accessibly published for anyone to judge if they wish to attend and residents of the baile can attend if they wish to raise issues regarding the baile or the municipality.

Once a decision is made, the decision will be noted and given to a delegate. The role of the delegate is not to represent their opinion or positions as that of the community, but instead strictly to represent the position and decisions of their assembly. They will be elected from people within the
assembly. That delegate will be sent to an assembly of the municipality’s other balie delegates to represent the views and decisions made by the assembly and what goes on within the municipal assembly will be made a matter of accessible public record. If the delegate has been shown not to have represented the view of the assembly accurately, then they can be recalled by matter of public vote. I would recommend that a vote on whether to recall a delegate be done as a matter of process at the beginning of an assembly. On ‘yes’ or ‘no’ matters, a delegate might not even be needed, and instead the decision of the balie assembly need only be noted. The balie assembly would also give the balie some autonomy on things that affect them directly like libraries, parks and schools. I believe decisions should be made at the lowest possible level.

All this may seem a breeding ground for parochialism. I do not believe that it would breed parochialism for the simple fact that like ‘no man is an island’, no community is either. A balie cannot exist and operate on its own and requires the cooperation and help of other balies to function not merely on its own but as a municipality. The balie would give power to people within the municipality, not allow it to operate on its own. Individual balies should be encouraged to work together if matters concern other balies. I would not want to see one balie have the only say on a service or resource that another balie uses. If a balie assembly breaks municipal agreements, I believe it is well within the right of the other balies in the municipality to put a stop to it, as they have broken a collective agreement that they agreed to as balies.

It is here, then, we move up to the municipality. The municipality would be a confederation of assemblies, with the decisions on the issues at hand being made by the balies and represented by their delegates. The municipality would be responsible for what is today dealt by councils. The municipality will be there, primarily, to facilitate cooperation between the balies in matters of running and operating a city and its services. It would not be like we have now, a chamber of top-down rulers, but rather where the delegates of the balie assembly represent and operate decisions made for the municipality. Votes and discussions regarding the decisions made by the balies would be made here, and this would be the place where inter-balie cooperation would take place. The decisions and opinions voiced within the municipal assembly would be made a matter of public record so that each balie assembly can judge if their delegate had represented the decisions and consensuses made accurately.

It may also be prudent for municipalities to work with other municipalities in regard to shared services. The nature of municipalities means that no one municipality is exclusively alone with commuters perhaps living in one municipality and travelling to another. Municipalities should be encouraged to work together either as whole blocks of municipalities or as individual balies over municipal lines. This interplay could provide the means for the running of a nation as a confederation of municipalities.

The things I have laid out here are not meant to be prescriptive, nor do I make any illusions to perfection, instead I have laid out a system that is intended to be bottom-up rather than top-down and directly democratic, encouraging active participation in the decision and policy making process of our communities. Nor do I make any illusions to it being easy. What I have laid out requires a constantly informed and active citizenry. It will be a learning curve too. All of this can only be done actively, but I believe that is better than a top-down political system where at best the citizen is a mere bystander within the state. What I have laid out here also may seem radical, which is not always a bad thing. The term, radical, merely means something that is largely different from the status quo. Most ideas were once radical. The key feature of radical is that it suggests a fundamental examination of the root causes and processes.

I do not make illusions that this system will be easy to implement. It proposes taking power from centralised forms of government and redistributing it amongst the people. This is never easy. People with great power rarely give it up willingly. If the ideas I have laid out are to be implemented, I expect there be pushback. However, I do believe power is best distributed in a decentralised, bottom-up manner, rather than a centralised matter, that people have the capacity, and will to make their own decisions as a community and run their communities as a whole. I believe that democracy is best placed in the hands of the people and that true meaning should be given to the word ‘democracy’.


Abbie Archer runs a Youtube channel on aspects of Edinburgh History called ‘Historia Lothiana’ (https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCHEGY_PMWq9Gtja2lWhYy9sA) and is a graduate in history from the Open University.
Since I first came to Scotland six years ago, I have tried to find answers for two questions which hit me in local politics. First, why native Scots - despite of all their enormous social sensitivity, openness, psychic impregnation against racism that means natural leftism, unique in the West - do not vote either for the Scottish Socialist Party or for the Socialist Party Scotland (nor for any other even the most interesting initiatives like Solidarity – Scotland’s Socialist Movement). Second, why neither approach newcomers like me.

I understand that this is the strategic problem of the true left in Scotland, but as a new Scot, an immigrant from Eastern Europe, I am interested not only in the causes of this phenomenon, but also in the hermetic nature of Scottish socialism for the newcomers like me. Very often we are and remain just at the bottom of the social ladder as a part of the new working class. So, we should be a natural recruiting ground and base for Scottish socialism, fighting together for an increase in the minimum wage, resources for the health service, nationalization of public transport and lot of other issues that directly affect our wallets (which are the main motive for our immigration). But, while you can find Polish or Hungarian supporters of the SNP and even some of them are SNP activists, in the same lot present in the ‘Yes’ movement, you’ll also find a lot of new Scots that prefer to vote Labour or LibDem (or even Tory) than engage on the side of authentic Scottish Left.

One of the reasons for this situation is the social experiment carried out since the fall of the Eastern Bloc in 1989. As a result of this transformation, neo-liberalism has gained almost total exclusivity in shaping the consciousness of Eastern Europeans. But after 30 years of listening to the proverb that ‘a rising tide lifting all boats’ which we just have to wait for rather like the people of Israel led by Moses through the desert to the promise land, we have been caught in the trap of medium economic growth and low wages. This means that we new Scots have become refugees from the dictatorship of the neo-liberal paradigm.

Hence, coming to the West and now working here for some time, we are beginning to realize that, for example, unions are not public enemies as we were taught they were in our former countries. We are also come to understand the true spirit of capitalism when an employer order us to clean their property for another day with the same old cloth and with just water because s/he ‘has’ to pay for their new Porsche and does not intend to buy any new cleaning materials. Unfortunately, still too few of us are able to translate this growing socio-economic knowledge into political conclusions.

In 2014, I read the Tories’ leaflets warning (in good Polish!) how dangerous independence would be for our workplaces. Since then SNP and the ‘Yes’ movement have attempted to find the common language with immigrants. And on a certain level of perception, the equation ‘Scotland’s independence = European Union = a free labour market’ may be enough to respond to the new needs of the new Scots. However, even though the SNP has already won the majority of votes of these immigrants who decide to vote, it seems it has in the long run little to offer them. The economic crisis stemming from the pandemic has already started to give proof to that. Of course, majority of us support independence and Scotland is our home. But what if again we are in another desert led by another Moses?

Recent polls, giving SNP around 47% of support are impressive. But who needs such results a year before the election? Great, 54% of respondents in the summer of 2020 want independence – but we know, that there will be no referendum this year, and the higher the polls, the more certain that Westminster will never let us to vote again in a referendum. The science of sport knows of the phenomenon of overtraining too quickly to obtain championship form.

Yes, the First Minister makes a very good impression in England during lockdown. But what for? Does she really believe that someone will give Scotland independence just because the ‘Scottish way’ of fighting the coronavirus seems to be better? No, no one will do so. You do not get given independence - you have to take it for yourself. And an even more important issue is that the struggle for the life and health of the nation is really marvelous but as long as we cannot introduce our own employment-shields and support programs, and need to ask Westminster for additional money for the Scottish NHS, the so-so soft-social-democratism of the SNP builds the greatest possible trap for our economy and its own self-determined policies. Yes, I know that emphasizing the limited Holyrood legislative competencies is a proven practice of ‘Yes’ agitation. But that in itself is not enough because what if some naive newcomer asks ‘why haven’t you introduce more progressive tax system?’ or ‘we had our land reform just after the Second World War, haven’t you heard how to do that here?’

We are Scottish working class - Polish, Romanian and Hungarian cleaners, chefs, waitresses, builders and drivers. We work in the devastated hospitality sector, in the wounded retail sector and just after the words ‘furlough’ and ‘80%’ – we can hear mainly ‘redundancy’ now. So, is there anything different, what Scottish Left would like to say to us in this brave new world of the ‘new normal’?

Konrad Rękas is a Polish born but living in Aberdeen journalist and columnist who is active in the Aye Aberdeen movement, chair of the Polish YES for Scotland Association. In Poland, he was the former speaker of the Lubelskie Province Regional Assembly and adviser to farmers’ unions.
I Am Not Your Negro (2016),
Director: Raoul Peck
Reviewed by Jackie Bergson

Documentary director, Raoul Peck, strikes a supremely eloquent political and cultural chord with I Am Not Your Negro. Based upon James Baldwin’s book, Remember This House, this award-winning film is deeply enriching. Featuring extracts from the author’s interviews, oratories and lectures, his philosophy is also conveyed through narrative voiceover by Samuel L. Jackson. The actor’s enigmatic tones steer us steadily through the film’s fullness of detail and complex imagery without losing a beat.

Badwin’s beliefs in the ability of hope, language and media to create a better world are consistent themes which punctuate his powerful, insightful dialogues on the meaning of being black in America. In his book, he categorised his philosophy under three themes: heroes, witness and purity. To exemplify these themes, Peck has deftly selected relevant photographs and film images from the past century. No punches are pulled about their collective relevance to past and present day attitudes to racial segregation and prejudice.

The narrative of how and why the talents of glamorous movie actors and stars, including such as Sidney Poitier, Harry Belafonte and Lena Horne, changed mass attitudes to black people is frequently juxtaposed with shocking journalistic images of police violence upon both ordinary and extraordinary blacks living in white societies. Some of the first journalistic images we see are of black policemen joining their white colleagues in beating up black protesters in Birmingham, Alabama. Peck, therefore, commands that his audiences see and understand the fullest possible picture. His techniques work - his film is completely absorbing.

Iconic political and cinematic figures and non-famous, quiet protesters are brought to light as noble, human emblems of both hope and sorrow. Lost - now found - black and white photos of schoolchildren proudly holding up signs stating that they were against going to school with Negroes reflect how the offensiveness of the other n-word, which Baldwin chooses to use to make points, became replaced by other kinds of gross tyranny. I Am Not Your Negro uses many such journalistic photographs to echo his oratory genius in conveying how and why the legal abolition of slavery in the nineteenth century under President Lincoln and the consequent end of apartheid in America held somewhat shallow significance. Language and hope as ideas are, thus, also exposed as being tough yet fragile, useable yet abuse-able, depending upon who wields and beholds their power.

We witness Baldwin exploring an interesting point in one interview about Bobby Kennedy’s public statement on TV – also screened in the film - that he saw no reason why there should not one day be a black American President. The point he makes is that Kennedy’s words barely concealed the premise that blacks were relatively more badly behaved and regressed than whites. The author himself concluded in discussing this type of concept that ‘the black population has not succumbed to raging paranoia’ despite white expectations. One wonders how he could or would make a similar pronouncement today.

Peck successfully shares his understanding with us of the reasons why many enlightened people of any colour openly admired and invested in FBI-blacklisted Baldwin’s intellect. These people who valued the author’s views during his lifetime ensured that they were not suppressed, either by others’ differing opinions and contradictions or by the existential fear which he shared with friends such as Malcolm Luther King, Malcolm X and Medger Evans. Often resonating with deep grief and quiet rage which feels real yet never spills messily upon Jackson’s calm voiceovers, Baldwin’s communications and presence frequently illuminate points about feelings towards and media portrayals of his black and white brothers and sisters. This film especially highlights why, as a highly educated and well-connected insider, he was loved and respected within many influential quarters of society.

Compelling and edited to perfection, I Am Not Your Negro to some extent relates a familiar story of what it took for blacks around the world to keep standing up for their civil and human rights. The difference that this film brings is Baldwin’s perspective on why and how this struggle managed to turn more than a few corners since the imposition of slavery.

Whether the world has changed enough, could be changed more or has enough positive energy behind it to sustain lasting impact through future generations facing these issues may not yet be certain. To honour James Baldwin in recognising the professed power of whiteness over blackness is one of many strong reasons for watching this superior film.
Reviewed by Colin Fox

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

Reviewed by Colin Fox

John Lloyd is a contributing editor for the Financial Times and describes himself as a ‘first generation British neo-con’. Born in Anstruther in 1946 and the son of a hairdresser, he went to Edinburgh University where he joined the Communist Party and became ‘a Stalinist’ in that milieu. Following the disintegration of the Communist Party, he left to join Labour and became a supporter of Tony Blair and his war in Iraq.

He makes a militant defence of the Union. His central thesis in his The Great Mistake of Scottish Independence is, by his own admission, ‘a trumpet blast in defence of Scotland’s Union with the rest of Great Britain’, where he asserts ‘the nationalists understake the economic risks of independence’.

Published before the Coronavirus pandemic, he says of the previous political crisis around Brexit that it is not the game changer the SNP would have us believe. The impasse at Westminster during 2018-19 exposed the Commons to widespread scorn, he argues, including those SNP MPs who wanted the referendum result overturned. A ‘reluctant Remainer’, Lloyd felt the resounding vote in Scotland was accentuated by a poor ‘Leave’ campaign and the lack of a proper debate north of the Border. Be that as it may, his book’s purpose is to rally the Unionist cause.

‘Since the SNP took power in 2007 Unionists have been on the defensive’ he regrets. He argues the SNP’s claim to a ‘golden economic future’ outside the UK is based upon spurious facts, figures and assumptions. The Barnett Formula provides a rich subsidy to Scotland he argues - worth £10bn per annum - and this is how we have free tuition, free prescriptions and free personal care when England does not.

But ‘The economic case for independence is shaky’, insists Lloyd, citing low productivity, few exports and the illusion of Scandinavian style public services on Singaporean tax rates. His critique of Andrew Wilson’s Sustainable Growth Commission produces, unsurprisingly, agreement on the economic threats reached by the two neo-cons. Lloyd’s admiration for Wilson’s ‘realism’ does not prevent him, however, from delivering the withering conclusion – that it is Scotland’s austerity programme. Lloyd is not alone in seeing that prospect from Wilson’s plan.

The Scottish Socialist Party has repeatedly warned our allies in the ‘yes’ campaign we will not win a majority by hawking neo-liberal policies round the doors of working-class Scotland. Lloyd does accept that the present constitutional arrangements cannot hold and favours the federal constitution laid down by The Marquis of Salisbury in the House of Lords. His Act of Union Bill 2019 sees power devolved to four national Parliaments with a separate UK legislature dealing with macro-economic policy, relations with the EU, foreign affairs and defence similar to those arrangements operating in Germany and Canada. This idea is not new, of course, and the problems facing it have been well rehearsed. Not least is the complete lack of interest in the idea in England.

Nonetheless, Lloyd perseveres since, he argues: ‘Two rashly conceded referenda thoughtlessly overseen show Westminster must have more faith in its own rights and duties to good governance. And it must be militant in its defence of the Union’.

An admirer of the tactics employed by federalist supremo, Stephane Dior, during the 1995 Quebec referendum which he believes ‘showed that sharp, informed argument can undermine the rhetorical tropes of the nationalists’, Lloyd is at his most belligerent when insisting any future independence vote cannot be decided merely by those who live in Scotland. No, he wants the franchise extended to include not only the 850,000 expat Scots ‘who intend to come back and live here one day’ but the rest of the UK too!

Here we see the ‘Stalinism’ Lloyd was famous for during his days in the militantly unionist Communist Party of Great Britain. He insists UK voters must also have a say on the matter since it threatens ‘their Union too’. So much for the democratic principle adhered to by both sides in 2014 that Scotland has the right to decide its own future! Lloyd even offers up GK Chesterton’s poem ‘The Secret People’ to advance his case including the rather ominous lines: ‘But we are the people of England, and we have not spoken yet’.

Realising that he is on shaky ground, Lloyd backtracks, but only a little: ‘British citizens as a whole should be included with a voice rather than a vote’. Returning to his main theme he concludes: ‘... the nationalists have not prepared the Scottish people for secession and have based their case on an assurance independence will solve all problems and raise all boats’. Rather contradictorily, he fears ‘Independence may be Scotland’s fate’. But ‘yes’ supporters ought not to fall into this newspaperman’s trap.

I, for one, am nowhere near as convinced as he purports to be about the imminence of independence. The ‘yes’ movement retains only minority support and is experiencing much difficulty at present; stymied on a legally binding second referendum, befuddled by the blunder of allowing a mass movement to become a single party, facing an uncertain political landscape after the Covid-19 pandemic and the innate conservatism of the SNP who, in turn, face an incipient civil war. None of this gives independence supporters reason for optimism about the immediate future. Lloyd’s militant proposals should not, therefore, deflect ‘yes’ supporters from addressing our own challenges. For those require greater attention and wiser strategies than hitherto if we are to prevail.

Colin Fox is the national co-spokesperson of the Scottish Socialist Party and a former MSP

SHOULD AULD ACQUAINTANCE BE FORGOTT

THE GREAT MISTAKE OF SCOTTISH INDEPENDENCE

JOHN LLOYD

27 - ScottishLeft Review Issue 119 September/October 2020
Thompson, E. William
Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary,
Reviewed by Sean Sheehan

Those who cherish the notion that
left-wing radicals, given time,
will metamorphose into ultra-
conservatives like themselves tend to
be peeved by people like Tony Benn
and Jeremy Corbyn for so obviously
contradicting their mantra. If William
Morris’s thought received some of the
attention devoted to his wallpaper,
his political trajectory would prove
especially irksome: for, as the subtitle
of this biography indicates, here was
someone who matured from ‘romantic
to revolutionary’ and constitutes a case
of more than just pretty wallpaper.

Morris’s early interest in art and
architecture fostered a rhapsodic
immersion in medievalism and a never-
abandoned admiration for craftsmanship
in pre-capitalist modes of production.
The company that he and other artists
founded designed furniture, carpets,
jewellery, stained glass, metal work and,
of course, wallpaper – all characterized
by bright colours, though towards the
end of his life he expressed a preference
‘to live with the plainest whitewashed
walls and wooden chairs and tables’.

He was in his fifties when the political
course of his life began to unfold
and it occupies two-thirds of this still
definitive biography by the historian
E. P. Thompson. First published in
1955, revised by the author in 1976,
this is a splendid new edition from
Merlin Press. Morris joined an early
socialist party, the Social Democratic
Federation (SDF), in 1883, five years
before Marx’s Communist Manifesto
appeared in English; he learnt about
class conflict from a French edition of
Capital. He got to know refugees like the
anarchist, Kropotkin, and took to public
speaking, making him a heretic for the
establishment: ‘you can carp at the
masters in the prefects’ room, if you like,
but don’t let the Lower Fourth hear you’,
 admonished the Master of University
College, Oxford.

Following a split in the SDF, Morris
worked tirelessly for the Socialist League
but, dismayed by factional disputes, left
it in 1890. He continued to give political
talks until the year of his death in 1896.
Morris possessed prodigious energy but
his disposition was nervy; his body wore
itself out prematurely and he died at the
age of 63. Thompson does justice to
his art and intellect, a political thinker
who had his disputes with anarchists but
remained at heart a libertarian socialist.
John Blewitt’s William Morris & the
Instinct for Freedom, also published by
Merlin Press, extends an understanding
of his intellectual and cultural heritage.

Sean Sheehan writes for The Irish Times,
LensCulture and The Eye of Photography.

Musto, M. (ed.) The Marx
Revival: Key Concepts
and New Interpretations,
Cambridge University Press, 2020,
£75, pp408, 9781316338902
Reviewed by Sean Sheehan

The focus of this book is announced
in the title, The Marx Revival: Key
Concepts and New Interpretations,
and its essays by 22 contributors are
symptomatic of renewed interest in a
thinker who can no longer be shackled
with responsibility for abusive state
power. Chapter headings are to the
point - Communism, Class Struggle,
State, Ecology, Migration, Colonialism
and so on - and the prose mostly keeps
to an equally no-nonsense approach.
This makes the edited collection a Marx
for our times.

The first essay kicks off with neat
exposition of some basics: capitalism’s
drive to create surplus value through
commodity production; money as
means and motive for creating capital
and the consequent distorting of
human relations; the system as a
structure (capitalists die like everyone
else but the system carries on) that
is incredibly versatile but inherently
unstable and, ultimately, its own
gravedigger. Traditional readings
emphasise economic crises and
increasing immiseration as capitalism’s
gravedigger but climate change calls for
a rethink and an appreciation of Marx’s
importance as an ecological thinker.
Nature, seen as a ‘free gift to capital’ (the
quote is from Capital) and not part
of the system’s value algorithm, can be
destroyed in the drive to accumulate
profits. The ‘Ecology’ chapter makes
clear Marx’s insight into what he called
the ‘social metabolism’ between man
and nature and the chapter goes on to
relate this to climate scientists’ warnings
about a planetary disaster.

There is no chapter on ideology, not
even an index entry, but Marx was
presciently aware of what he described
as ‘the bewitched, distorted and upside-
down world haunted by Monsieur
capital’. Contemporary examples
would be the marketing of zero-hour
working and creeping privatisation
of the NHS as a new freedom of choice.
Not surprisingly, aspects of everyday life
under corporate control can come to
be experienced as a kind of alien rule.
How easily people can be controlled
into accepting this – as depicted in the
superb Captive State movie – needs
also to be examined through the lens of
Marx; something that writers like China
Mieville, Žižek, Terry Eagleton or Paul
Mason could tackle with fluency but
who are missing from this collection of
articles. But this remains an important
book, asking and offering some answers
to the question of what kind of Marxism
is emerging in the world we now inhabit
and what it can mean to call oneself a
communist.
Gessen, M. Surviving Autocracy,
Riverhead Books/Penguin Random House, 2020, 978059318893, £21.45
Reviewed by Andrew Noble

In the allegedly free late 1960s, I completed my doctorate on the profound influence of Russian novelist, Dostoevsky, on the young Canadian-American writer, Saul Bellow. In retrospect, I now feel that, in part, the thesis was driven by a desire that this mutual level of creative fictional genius somehow serve to reconcile America and Russia and remove the terminal nuclear threat of the Cold War.

Now, ironically, all these years later I find myself reviewing a brilliant, utterly scathing book on Trump's America by a Russian writer new to me, Masha Gessen. She is an investigative journalist of the highest order with a complex, historically deep, comparative intelligence. Her grasp of English language is perfectly employed to reveal the havoc visited by the Trump administration on all the vital institutions of American civic and legal life. Her great advantage, which she used to enormous effect is that she had made acute studies of other autocratic cultures (Hungary, Israel and of course, her own dear land Russia). She knew from early in her life the danger of living in a country where political lying was a constant and no opposition would be brooked. Her biography of Putin, The Man Without a Face, must have required extreme courage and honesty. Investigative journalists are a well-defined category fatally visited by Putin's hit men. The opposite of this politically psychopathic Russia has been from the October 1917 revolution onwards discovered in writers like Vasily Grossman, and the Mandelstams (husband and wife), a sacred sense of opposing truth to power. Gessen has that quality and it leads her to be highly critical of many apolitical American journalists who are quite unable to properly penetrate and reveal the flood of Trump's personal and political lying.

Critical to her book is, of course, the Putin/Trump axis. This provokes her stringent denial of the historical Great Man thesis beloved by the present Churchill parodist currently in Number 10. Thus she writes: 'A reading of contemporaneous account will show that both Hitler and Stalin struck many of their countrymen as men of limited ability, education and imagination – and, indeed, as being incompetent in government and military leadership. Contrary to popular wisdom, they were not savants, possessed of one extraordinary talent that brought them to power. It was rather, the blunt instrument of reassuring ignorance that propelled their rise in a frighteningly complex world'.

Having defined how we see autocrats in history, Gessen goes on to define how: 'We recognise the desperate desire of Putin to be admired or at least feared – usually literally at his country's expense. Still, physical distance makes villains seem bigger than they are in real life. Just as the full absurdity of Trump was sinking in, crushing any hope that he would turn 'presidential', Putin, in the American imagination, was turning into a brilliant strategist, a skilled secret agent who was plotting the end of the western world. In fact, Putin, was and remains a poorly educated, underinformed, incurious man whose ambition is vastly out of proportion to his understanding of the world. To the extent that he had any interest in the business of governing, it is solely his own role – on the world stage or on Russian television – that concerns him. Whether he is attending a summit, piloting a plane, or hanging gliding with Siberian cranes, it is the spectacle of power that interests him. In this, he and Trump are alike: to them, power is the beginning and the end of government, the presidency, politics – and public politics is only the performance of power.

For her analysis of Putin and Trump, Gessen has drawn the highest praise from Timothy Snyder whose The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America (2018) is an extraordinarily lucid account of the ongoing regression of twenty first century nations into tyrannical forms of government with all the resultant catastrophic consequences for politics, economics, civility and culture. On the dust-jacket of Surviving Autocracy, Snyder declares Gessen as 'an indispensable voice of and for this culture. On the dust-jacket of Autocracy, Masha Gessen

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officers of state as completely loyal to his every unstable whim. The constant sacking of staff, both good and less often bad are witness to this.

Another quality shared by Putin and Trump is anti-black racialism in general and, in particular, an intense loathing of Obama. From Snyder’s study of the Putin encouraged detestation of Obama, we know that on the President’s birthday in 2014 ‘Russian students in Moscow projected a laser light show on the US embassy building, portraying him performing fellatio on a banana’. Such virulence obviously led to increased xenophobic enthusiasm for a Trump presidency. Also, the correct Russian belief that Trump would be putty in Putin’s hands. Putin also saw Trump as his partner in protecting heterosexuality. This explains Trump’s subsequent attacks on homosexual America and his being entranced by White Evangelical America. He is also Anti-Christ to its

Mammon worship.

Much more than any affinity Putin felt for Trump, Snyder has suggested that they wanted him in post to bring down the institution an essence of American democracy itself: ‘Russia’s intervention in the 2016 US election was not just an attempt to get a certain person elected. It was application of pressure to the structure. The victory of a Russian-backed candidate could be less important, in the long run, than the evolution of the system as a whole, away from democracy’.

This sounds like The Manchurian Candidate where the baddies win big time. As I write however, the estimable Luke Harding has published Shadow State: Murder Mayhem and Russia’s Remaking of the West (2020). Russia’s involvement, especially its cyber power and the obedience of a near wholly degenerate Republican party has over the last four years wrought havoc to America. Gessen traces Trump’s wanton disastrous destruction of America’s civic, medical and legal institutions. He is the fulfilment of Ronald Regan’s wish to remove all central government so that private enterprise, in the insanely alleged American way, can run the whole country. Trump is, indeed, the President of the Deal. And, the antithesis of the New Deal that right wing Americans have so long yearned for. Unfortunately, for their malign fantasy, among the multitude of institutions Trump either gutted or scrapped, was the world class Pandemic unit he inherited from Obama. The terrible fatal consequences rage on. If Trump gets an official tomb the only possible inscription would be ‘I am not responsible.’

Dr Andrew Noble is a Leverhulme Emeritus Fellow

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**Culture and creativity during Covid: teaching and learning at home**

David McKinstry is a teacher – see his biographical details below - who has also been engaged in home schooling of his son, Gabriel, during lock down. Gabriel, like many pupils, was finding it hard to adjust to the new style of learning. In attempt to help him in his studies, David wrote a series of poems around his subjects, covering the subjects of art, English, geography, history, maths, modern studies, and science. This proved to be successful because most were quite humorous and lightened up his lock down learning. Education Scotland has decided to publish one of the poems and so it seems there may be wider value in the poems being useful in helping pupils’ access both their studies and literature during these unusual times. We publish with David’s permission those poems concerning history and modern studies.

**Passchendaele**

From dreaming spires
To county shires
They came to fight
at Passchendaele

From every village hall
They answered Albion’s call
For on that field
They dare not fail.

One yard the more
One thousand the less,
Whilst mothers wept
As they received the news
By postal address.

In dining rooms
Fathers quietly cry,
For telling their sons
Tales of courage
Based upon a Kipling lie.

**This is our Place**

Scotland always proud,
But sometimes we must celebrate
Our people aloud.

From highland clan
To Coatbridge mum,
With purse at the ready
To buy the weans
Ice cream at the van.

From Scots Asian doctor
Who serves her community
From dawn to dark
Then puts on her
‘See you jimmy bonnet’
To support her country
At Hampden park.

From businessman
Creating wealth in designer suit,
To firefighter whose values
Are other than making loot.

These are our people

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Dr David McKinstry teaches history in the Humanities Department of Port Glasgow High School, Scotland. He read History at Glasgow University and received his PhD from Strathclyde University. He has taught History in Secondary and Higher Education for the past twenty years and is currently writing a biography on Lyndon Johnson. He is also author of *We Shall Overcome - The Politics of Civil Rights, May 1963 to August 1964* (VDM Verlag Dr. Müller (now Omniscriptum Publishing Group), 2008, 9783639107630).
Normally, writing the September edition of this column would be a flying-by-the-seat-of-my-pants affair as I would be having to file my copy in the middle of the Edinburgh Fringe. Obviously not this year. Due to Covid19, this year’s Fringe was cancelled months ago as the whole thing was considered to be a health hazard. Of course, anyone who has ever been to any of the free shows in the festival will be well aware that a number of venues always a health hazard. Audiences crushed close together in places like Cabaret Voltaire or Underbelly would quite frequently voice the fear of what might happen if the place went on fire. Ironically, a fire in any of those rooms this year may have been a good thing, as it would have totally destroyed any traces of Coronavirus on hard surfaces.

In 2019, I did a hundred live gigs in August. In the same month this year, I have done three ‘virtual’ gigs, most of them in the house, in my home office, looking out at the house across the road. That is how I have been doing my comedy since the start of lockdown.

I was doing such a gig back in early April and noticed that the guy across the road was washing his car. The next day, I looked out of the same window and saw the guy across the road washing his car. The following day, I looked out of the same window and observed the same scenario. This went on on a daily basis until the end of June. Every day, I looked out of the window to see the guy across the road washing his car. Day after day, I looked out of the window to see the guy across the road washing his car.

And that to me summed up the utter tedium of lockdown, the desperate lengths to which people would go to alleviate the utter tedium of their daily lives. Namely, that someone would fill in their meaningless days by looking out of a window to look at someone else washing their car.

Like most people, I binge-watched whatever television was available online, but I realised that things were getting out of hand when I found that I had reached series fifteen of Silent Witness, and was envious of the corpse as it appeared to be having a more interesting life that me. In fact, in common with a lot of people, I have suffered periods of depression and harboured suicidal thoughts. Indeed, one of the things that kept me going was the knowledge that I would only get ten people at my funeral.

In case anyone is wondering why the Scottish Government limited numbers of people attending funerals, I can reveal that this had nothing to do with concerns about potential spread of the virus. It was in fact brought in to stop fights, However, anyone who has been to a Scottish wake will know that you can still get a pretty good rammy with only three people in the room. However, normality is slowly returning. Thankfully, I can now get a haircut at a barber’s shop after four months of cutting my own hair. Doing the haircut was hard but having the haircut chat with myself was harder still. ‘Staying in again this weekend? Going nowhere on holiday this year?’

However, now it seems we are returning to something closer to normality. For example, Scottish football has resumed. Not only that, but normal service was very soon resumed by a number of players behaving live like utter eejits. The actions of the ‘Aberdeen Eight’ and ‘The Celtic One’ threatened the very fragile return of the game. While most of us were not surprised to see professional players behaving like irresponsible children, many were somewhat gobsmacked to discover that the Celtic player in question was not Leigh Griffiths. In fact, like most other Celtic fans, I was amazed to find out that Boli Bolingoli could prove to be an even bigger liability off the pitch this season than he was on the pitch last term.

What form of normality the Scottish Conservatives are returning to is anybody’s guess. After six months of anonymity, The Human Potato with High Blood Pressure otherwise known as Jackson Carlaw came to the sudden revelation that he was utterly shit at the job. How he didn’t realise he was utterly shit at his job six months ago we will never know. What is even more of a mystery is the Tories’ faith in the new leadership. Do they really think that football referee, Douglas Ross (otherwise known as Rangers’ twelfth man), is going to pull it back for them? I think they may have vastly overestimated the masonic vote in Scotland.

Vladimir McTavish may be performing live in a venue near you before the end of 2020. Who knows?
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