Facing a future where the only certainty is uncertainty
As we begin 2021, 2020 should be remembered as the year in which politics trumped economics twice – on Brexit and Covid-19. The former was heavily opposed – especially in its harder forms – by the majority of businesses in Britain. The latter saw massive state intervention of the scale that could only have been wished for after the 2008-2009 global financial crash. But neither Brexit nor Covid mean that the neo-liberal variant of capitalism has been undermined in any fundamental sense. Bailouts for the bosses are not synonymous with progressive changes in who owns, controls and benefits from resources. Many on the left made this mistake when saying that the banks were ‘nationalised’ after the 2008-2009 global financial crash. To make state intervention synonymous with public ownership remains one of the key challenges for the left in 2021 and beyond. But at least the left can see that state power still sufficiently exists and can be used to create major changes to how society runs.

In this battle to use state power for progressive ends, the only other certainty we have is the continued and pervading prevalence, ironically, of more uncertainty. We have certainty over the threat to jobs, living standards, public services, public health and so on. What we have uncertainty over is just how big the threat is and for how long it will last. And, we have uncertainty over how situations can change and how quickly they can do so if we recall the so-called ‘rainbow’ parliament, where the colours of red, grey and green were prominent. The left led unions have been pretty muted in their responses. This overall difficulty was exemplified in the Brexit vote. Even though Starmer said it was a ‘thin’ deal, he recommended a vote for it. While 36 Labour MPs abstained in the vote, just one voted against – albeit for different reasons. The deal is worse than ‘thin’ as the freedom to undermine, amongst other issues, workers’ rights is now self-evident. It’s not just London becoming ‘Singapore on the Thames’ that is a danger but, rather, bargain basement Britain in a levelling down race with Europe and other countries.

Recent ructions in the SNP, while welcome, do not yet show any sign of moving the SNP in the direction of representing a left-wing alternative to Labour. Indeed, Starmer will have helped Sturgeon solidify her powerful position inside and outside the SNP by his proposal to establish a constitutional commission to consider enhanced devolution. This is not even a promise of ‘jam tomorrow’. It’s more a case of ‘we’ll consider your case for ‘jam tomorrow’ at a date to yet be determined’. Moreover, and with a growing majority in favour of independence, perhaps the ‘devo max’ ship has sailed it would be more relevant for Labour to change its position of opposition to another referendum. Furthermore, haven’t we heard that one before with the ‘Vow’ made just before the 18 September 2014 referendum? The ensuing Scotland Act 2016 did not exactly set the heather on fire on the devolution front.

Looking ahead to 6 May 2021, the SNP is well positioned to increase its majority in parliament. The Tories are in crisis in Holyrood and Westminster. So too is Labour. How many will look back on the glory days of 2003 when we had our one and only ‘rainbow’ parliament, where the colours of red, grey and green were prominent.

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David Player – in memoriam

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When politics trumped economics

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Feedback - Held to account?

The editorial of Scottish Left Review (120, Nov-Dec 2020) ended with the statement: ‘As we go to print, Jeremy Corbyn has been suspended from the Labour Party. The reason given was Corbyn’s statement that the problem of anti-Semitism in Labour has been ‘dramatically overstated for political reasons’, an observation shared by the SLR. It is a grave attempt to restrict the right of reply and open debate.’ As a member of the magazine’s editorial committee, I disagree with the statement because it focused on the individual, ignored the context and detracted from the significance of the publication of the Equality and Human Rights Commission’s (EHRC) ‘Investigation into anti-Semitism in the Labour Party’, the serving on the Labour Party of an unlawful act notice under section 21 of the Equality Act 2006 and finding that the Labour Party breached the Equality Act 2010 by acts of indirect discrimination. The report deserved to be acknowledged, however briefly, given we are a ‘non-party’ publication and seek ‘to provide a focal point for thought and discussion for the Scottish left’ according to our mission statement.

The EHRC’s inquiry was prompted by evidenced complaints alleging acts of anti-Semitism in the Labour Party and was launched in May 2019. It is worth noting that its investigation was led from Scotland and out with the London bubble. The 128-page report includes seven annexes and examines a wide variety of operational matters including staff training, resourcing of the complaints system and complaint investigation files. It is disappointing to note that the EHRC encountered a number of delays in receiving information, which extended the timeframe of our investigation. At times, we were seriously concerned about the Party’s commitment to working with us and to dedicating enough resources to the matter’ (p18).

The report is critical and makes ‘recommendations for change’ which require to be followed through promptly and ‘the first draft of the action plan’ had to be with the EHRC by 5pm on Thursday 10 December 2020, and the deadline was met. I doubt the date was randomly chosen as it coincided with the UN’s International Human Rights Day. Its theme matched with action: ‘We will reach our common global goals only if we are able to create equal opportunities for all, address the failures exposed and exploited by COVID-19, and apply human rights standards to tackle entrenched, systematic, and intergenerational inequalities, exclusion and discrimination.’

The EHRC evidences a number of problems. For example, despite sustained, intense media attention on how Labour was dealing with allegations of anti-Semitism, pernicious coverage by hostile commentators and the negative impact on public opinion, the recommendations from the internal inquiry led by Baroness Chakrabarti in 2016, were not implemented, resulting in ‘significant failings in the way the Labour Party has handled anti-Semitism complaints over the last four years.’

In fact, we are reminded that there were two other relevant investigations in 2016: Baroness Royall conducted a specific inquiry into allegations of anti-Semitism at Oxford University Labour Club; and the Home Affairs Select Committee (HASC) published its report ‘Anti-Semitism in the UK’. However, the EHRC concluded that ‘the Party has failed to implement the recommendations made in these reports fully, or to take effective measures to stop anti-Semitic conduct from taking place. It is regrettable that many of the concerns we raise here were first raised in these reports over four years ago’.

It remains a puzzle why three reports failed to make the necessary impact, allowing the issues to fester. The EHRC determined Labour now prioritises reform and has stipulated that the remedial action plan must include timescales and success measures which will be monitored. The EHRC may take enforcement action ‘if the Labour Party fails to meet its commitments’ (p15), such as on operating ‘a transparent and independent anti-Semitism complaints process, which ensures that all cases of alleged discrimination, harassment or victimisation are investigated promptly, rigorously and without political interference.’

The EHRC’s report also makes recommendations aimed at ‘all politicians and political leaders’ to adhere to ‘equality law, while still protecting freedom of expression and engaging in the robust and wide-ranging debate that is a core part of living in a democratic society’ (p4). Helpfully, the report cites Articles 10, 11 and 17 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) which is given domestic effect through the Human Rights Act 1998 – another law passed by the Labour Government. The rights to freedom of expression and to association do not permit the abuse of other people’s rights and the EHRC illustrates the distinction: Article 10 will protect Labour Party members who, for example, make legitimate criticisms of the Israeli government, or express their opinions on internal Party matters, such as the scale of anti-Semitism within the Party, based on their own experience and within the law. It does not protect criticism of Israel that is anti-Semitic.

Politicians are entitled to give soundbites but they should refrain from statements which feed the media piranhas intent on discrediting a progressive left political vision. Similarly, supportive media should not shy away from acknowledging operational and leadership failings.

Carole Ewart is a public policy and human rights consultant @ EwartHumanRight

- An alternative viewpoint is set out by Sandy Hobbs on pp13-14 in this issue.

UCS work-in 50th anniversary

The founder of Scottish Left Review, Jimmy Reid, played a leading role in the one of the most successful campaigns of the post-war period. Starting in June 1971 and concluding in October 1972, the Upper Clyde Shipbuilders’ work-in humbled the Heath Conservative government. It was a new industrial tactic without precedence. In this issue and others over the next year, Scottish Left Review will be celebrating, commemorating and critiquing the work-in. We begin in this issue – on following pages - with some materials to allow readers to acquaint and re-acquaint themselves with the work-in. The Jimmy Reid Foundation is hosting a number of events over the coming period. The first is on Thursday 28 January 2021 at 7pm – an online talk given by Professor John Foster with discussion by a UCS veteran, James Cloughley, Stella Rooney of UNITE Scotland Young Members and Morgan Horn, a UNITE Scotland organiser. For details, see https://reidfoundation.scot/
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ovel coronavirus (COVID-19) is a new strain of coronavirus first identified in Wuhan, China towards the end of 2019. Clinical presentation may range from mild-to-moderate illness to pneumonia or severe acute respiratory infection. COVID-19 was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) on 12 March by which time it had arrived in Europe with shocking scenes from Italy relayed across Europe. Lockdown in the UK began in the UK on 23 March but only after the Cheltenham race meet and other mass events were allowed to proceed with potentially lethal consequences. By December, over 60,000 people in the UK had died.

From March, public services rapidly changed priorities and previously insurmountable barriers to change fell away. The NHS transformed almost overnight to cope with unprecedented demands, discharging many services, discharging patients back home or into residential and nursing home care and setting up new crisis services to cope with the anticipated demands. Councils closed down many services but within days created new ones to care for the kids of key workers and provide support for hundreds of thousands of vulnerable people who were told to stay at home.

Those who argue that radical change cannot happen overnight, or even in the lifetime of a parliament, should acknowledge how much was achieved at pace when people were united by a common purpose. However, it is recognised that this was achieved at a cost to ‘normal’ services and with huge demands on key front line staff and managers. Public health departments, that had suffered years of cuts to budgets and staffing levels and so had little capacity, became the centre for expert advice and support on the unprecedented crisis.

From March, extensive measures were implemented across many countries to try and slow the spread of COVID-19. Whilst this was referred to as ‘following the science’, the main purpose of lockdown, social distancing, public messages about hand hygiene and appeals for people to stay away from A&E departments was to stop the NHS being overwhelmed by patients and staff contracting COVID-19. There was a much publicised shortage of PPE and ventilators but, arguably more important, also a shortage of nurses to care for the Covid and non-Covid sick. Numbers of registered nurses in the NHS has for many years failed to keep pace with the increasing need for their skills. Whilst PPE and ventilators, and even new hospital buildings, could be sourced in a matter of weeks or months, nurses take three years to train.

From the beginning the WHO advised governments to ‘Test, Test, Test’ in order to track the virus, understand epidemiology and suppress transmission through self-isolating those who had the virus. However, testing the population was never really started in the UK with only those who were symptomatic getting access to testing. This was not a failure of the NHS but of a 40-year long failure of industrial and scientific policy and of funding the NHS that left the UK with limited testing facilities and no manufacturing capacity to rapidly produce the reagents needed for testing.

NHS systems could cope with testing of patients but the UK government had to set up from scratch the Nightingale Labs to cope with the demand for testing people in the community. The option of commandeering the research facilities of private industry for testing or for the manufacturing of the reagents was not considered.

Acute hospitals quickly became COVID-19 hot zones so the priority to protect the vulnerable elderly and the capacity of the NHS led to a rapid discharge of patients into care/nursing homes and to the community. Without a testing regime in place, this was a major mistake and something which will no doubt come under intense scrutiny through the judicial review agreed by Parliament. At the same time, the failure of many of the mostly privately-run care homes to apply strict infection control measures or to ensure staff were paid whilst needing to isolate compounded the situation leading to the huge number of deaths in those establishments. Neither the staff nor residents in the care homes or those coming out of hospital were being tested, nor was the virus being tracked in these settings, until someone was symptomatic by which time it was too late to stop it spreading.

Suddenly, as we all clapped for carers, the nation realised the importance of these staff, putting themselves at risk, saving lives and caring for elderly within the community as well as in care homes, but not getting tested.

In June, lockdown was ended and we moved to the recovery phase for the country, remobilising paused NHS services, and opening up industry, office buildings, retail, education and leisure. A proper functional test and track system which the UK government boasted would be world class was still not in place. It is clear that the end of lockdown was taken for economic and public spending reasons and not because the virus had been beaten or that the necessary testing systems were in place. The UK Tory government put its faith in the private sector, at huge costs, to deliver. It failed.

Its efforts to create an app that could track people who were in contact with the virus had to be scrapped and eventually arrived after a similar one was delivered in Ireland and Scotland. In England the, again hugely expensive, private test and track system was still not fully in place till around November.

In Scotland, setting up the test, trace and isolate system was a public health imperative for the NHS. Recruiting the experienced staff needed was a challenge but that was achieved with assistance from councils. The importance of isolation was critical, and the actions of unions, with the support of Directors of Public Health, winning the fight to ensure private sector care staff received their pay when they needed to isolate was crucial.

However, 10 months after the WHO declared the pandemic and called for ‘Test Test Test’ to be implemented, we remain still far short of this objective. Care home staff and residents have only been tested on a weekly basis for a few months. Care at home staff who visit up to a dozen homes of service users
each day were told in November that they would be tested but now know that it could be February or even March before that happens. Union pressure which won the initial commitment for this cannot, unfortunately, produce the significant additional capacity needed any sooner.

The return of students to university accommodation in September was a disaster as, without testing, asymptomatic students infected others and thousands of new cases were reported. Testing before they went home for Christmas may help prevent something similar happening in reverse and testing again in early 2020 may prevent a repeat.

Schools, where up to 2,000 pupils and staff congregate each day without the recommended social distancing, do not have testing offered. The UK government’s announcement in late December, as English schools closed, that secondary schools would have testing facilities available in January has been met with incredulity by the education unions who, understandably, ask ‘where are the staff who will administer these tests’?

Despite the introduction of tiers and levels of restrictions lasting months, including a return to almost full lockdown in Wales, the virus has not been controlled. The failure to regularly test in sufficient numbers has meant that the gains achieved in lockdown, such as reducing the R number and numbers of hospital admissions, has been wasted with each lockdown or greater restriction being followed by rises in cases. Just as in February, people still pass on the virus when they don’t know they have it as they don’t, and sometimes never, have symptoms.

There were concerns earlier that testing people who were not symptomatic would be ineffective as the test would often return a false negative result. There remain concerns about the efficacy of the available tests but experience has shown that without testing along WHO recommended lines, the UK’s response to Covid-19 has been much poorer that it could have been.

This was further emphasised when the announcement was made a week before Christmas that, due to a new strain spreading up to 70% faster than the original virus, restrictions would be increased across all of the country and, as the media reported it, Christmas would be cancelled. Testing would not have stopped the mutation of a new variant but higher levels of testing would have allowed for greater suppression from the start.

NHS services are again struggling. As of December, Scotland was in a better position than London and the south east of England but the NHS was still coping with significant Covid demands on top of trying to restore other services and the annual winter pressures. Staff are exhausted and resources are stretched. In addition, they are starting to deliver the Covid vaccine. This is initially to be prioritised to the frontline NHS staff and in-patients over 80 years of age, then care home residents and staff. The priorities beyond that have still to be decided with people with underlying health problems, home carers and school staff justifiably seeking a place high up the queue. Given the higher incidence of deaths among the BAME and poorer communities, demands for prioritisation are being raised here also.

As the spring approaches, the NHS will be delivering vaccinations to millions of people. The shortage of nurses, which was a feature earlier and throughout the pandemic is also an issue with the vaccination programme and will be more so if there is an increase in Covid-19 cases going into hospitals along the lines experienced in the south east of England. The demand for other NHS services, with a backlog of cases from before Covid-19 struck, will be immense.

WHO level testing must be put in place at the same time as all of these pressures in order that public services are not overwhelmed and the virus can finally be stopped from causing even more harm than it already has.

It is clear that, along with the scientific lessons learned from the pandemic, there are important political ones too. The NHS needs better funding to train and employ more nurses and specialist staff. Care homes need to be properly funded within a national care service. Councils who have responded well to the crisis but been further financially weakened need their long-term funding issues resolved to recover and rebuild community services. Industry and science need to be resourced and re-directed in order to build the capacity for the benefit of society as a whole so that in times of crisis like pandemics vulnerable people and the key institutions like the NHS, care and education can be protected.

Lilian Macer is the Convenor of UNISON Scotland

Fair Work progress report

In mid-December 2020, the Fair Work Convention published its ‘Fair Work in Scotland’ report which examined the progress of attaining the goals of the Fair Work Framework since its launch in 2016. The report is extremely problematic in its use of the data it deployed but this was not picked up upon by commentators because of the criticisms the report made, namely, identifying areas where no progress had been made, and by making recommendations for further action to be taken, especially by the Scottish Government. The report measured developments against the five dimensions of ‘Fair Work’ (namely, Security, Opportunity, Fulfilment, Respect and Effective Voice) by using 37 indicators and official statistics from the Office of National Statistics. The report stated that on 40% of indicators, the situation was ‘improving’, on 38% it was ‘maintaining’ and on 22% it was ‘worsening’. The critical flaw in the report occurs because is no evidence presented in it – or, indeed, even exists elsewhere - that ‘Fair Work’ accounts for any of these outcomes, especially the ‘improving’ ones. So ‘Fair Work’ is in danger of taking credit for developments that are, at best, not directly or discernibly connected to it and, at worst, it has nothing to do with. This is all the more apparent when one remembers that ‘Fair Work’ is almost entirely without any statutory underpinning. Scottish Left Review will report in detail on this in its next issue, the March/April ‘STUC’ issue.

Professor Gregor Gall, visiting professor of industrial relations, University of Leeds
Towards a set of principles for a National Care Service

Nick Kempe outlines the key principles and values that must underpin the reform of care in Scotland.

The Scottish Government’s ‘Independent Review of Adult Social Care’, conducted by Derek Feeley, is due to report at the end of January and will ‘include consideration of a National Care Service’ (NCS). The principles upon which such a service would need to be based are not, however, within the review’s remit.

Instead, it has already decided its recommendations will be based on a human rights approach. Arguably, such an approach has now been promoted in Scotland for the users of services and their carers, if not the workforce, for almost twenty years. The National Care Standards, published in 2002, were intended to put concepts such as respect, dignity, privacy and choice at the centre of service provision. All subsequent social policy has reinforced this commitment. All that, however, has unravelled in the Covid crisis during which the human rights of people who receive and deliver social care services have been trampled over, from the failure to provide frontline staff with proper PPE to the continued denial of contact between care home residents and their relatives. Without taking a wider view, human rights approaches are likely to remain a toothless tiger. Ensuring social care is properly resourced, for example, so that all who need care receive it, is necessary if any rights to care are to be enforceable. In a 2020 paper entitled ‘Care after Covid’ for the Jimmy Reid Foundation, Gregor Gall argued the need to develop a set of principles to underpin a future NCS. This article takes up the challenge.

Our starting point should be that the NCS should be a universal service from cradle to the grave. Nothing less will embed it in people’s affections like the NHS. The Feeley Review’s remit is restricted to adult social care when last year, another Independent Care Review (ICR), for children, produced some radical recommendations for reform which were accepted by the Scottish Government. We don’t need two care systems and the findings of the Children’s ICR should have formed a stepping stone to a NCS. People who need care services as children continue to need care and support as they grow older, as is evidenced by the levels of suicide, addiction and mental health breakdown among young people who have experienced care and the problems children with disabilities face in the transition from children’s to adult services. Any set of principle for a NCS need to encompass people of all ages.

A second principle is that, like health, what counts as care must be broadly defined. In 2002, the Scottish Parliament introduced ‘Free Personal and Nursing Care’ to address some of the anomalies created by councils taking over responsibility for services that been free under the NHS. Eighteen years later eligibility criteria have been tightened and, in many areas, the only care councils now provide is that which comes under the official definition of ‘personal care’ tasks. That definition, inadvertently, helped create the 15-minute home care visit, where workers hardly had time to say hello, while ticking off tasks from the personal care list. Other forms of care, from practical support to helping a person with their social and emotional well-being, are now deemed low priority, with charges an additional deterrent for people who dare to ask for assistance. The result is that much care provision has become inhuman and only the rich, who can afford to buy what they want, receive the care they really need.

This leads to a third principle, namely, that care provision should be relationship based. The ICR for children concluded that relationships should be at the centre of the care system. Good care is dependent on mutuality, with people feeling comfortable and trusting those who care for them, not having a different carer every day and having some control over when they receive help. Experience of this not happening, rightly, helped drive demand from people with disabilities to take control over the services they receive. This means users of the NCS and their informal carers should be empowered to control the services that support them as far they are able. These two points have numerous implications for the delivery of services, from the time a carer has to spend with someone, to the personal qualities, skills and knowledge that they require to relate effectively to people, every one of whom is unique. But they also have implications for the way care services are negotiated and organised. That requires a set of skills that used to be provided by social workers before they were turned into gatekeepers under the Community Care Act 1990 and then stripped out of most services for adults. There is now a professional skills gap at the heart of social care. A start would be to think about how we make social workers and social work as central to a NCS as doctors and medicine are to the NHS.

Under the current system, frontline care staff can start working with some of the most vulnerable people in our society without training, so long as they commit to obtaining a relevant vocational qualification. This they are often required to do so in their own time and, unsurprisingly, many leave before they have done so. The right of all care staff to be properly trained, including paid induction and a minimum number of days training each year, must therefore be integral to the NCS. We also need to end the exploitation of staff, mainly women, as was illustrated in Ken Loach’s Sorry We Missed You. Abbie is a home carer whose own family are on the brink, in no small measure because of low pay. When she doesn’t have the time to help an older person properly one day, she returns in her own time in the evening, unpaid. The consequences for her own family are tragic. Abbie does the right thing but it is scandalous that thousands of underpaid workers are being put into similar positions each day. The NCS needs, like the NHS, to be based on national pay scales and national pay and conditions which are agreed through national collective bargaining.

Part of the way a NCS could meet the costs of improved pay and conditions is to stop money being extracted from the system in profit. In Scotland, the law already requires foster care services to be not for profit and there appears to be no legal impediment to extending this to all services. As well as removing businesses which have no interest in
care, a significant proportion of whom are based in tax havens, from the system, we need to create a NCS people want to support financially, whether through taxes or, where they have them, their own resources. No-one is ever likely to want to leave money to a private care home but self-funders, who are currently ripped off by extortionate fees, might leave money to services that were devoted to care, not profit. This happens with the hospices that operate within the NHS.

This brings us to charging and here the NCS should like the NHS be free at point of use. That would also be a logical consequence of shifting the focus of services from personal care to relationship-based care. Contrary to neo-liberal ideology, popular affection for the NHS shows that charging is not what makes people value services. The challenge for our politicians is to find other ways of funding the NCS.

While many of these principles should be relatively simple to articulate and agree, there are others that are likely to require significant debate. The first concerns the balance between individual rights and collective needs. The idea that care is a commodity, which can be chosen and bought, has been the driving force behind much social care reform since ‘new’ Labour. Choice is the justification the private care home sector give for their continued existence. The problem is wants are not needs, care involves compromises all on sides, and choice doesn’t work without money. There is little point in having individual budgets if they are insufficient to pay for the care people need. Since then, austerity that is now the norm, not the exception. Covid-19 has exposed the weaknesses of Self-Directed Support ideology still further, with people losing services and being discharged from hospital to care homes without consultation.

As a corollary, Covid-19 has also shown that ultimately, we are all in this together, that the rights of people needing care, their carers and the workforce are all important. We need new ways to address these issues and key to this is the democratisation of services. Imagine that each care home in Scotland had had a committee made up of staff, residents and their relatives with powers to make decisions. Would they have done any worse than government in mitigating the impacts of Covid-19?

Given the chance, they could have come up with practical solutions to problems the Scottish Government and Health and Social Care Partnerships (HSCPs) have proved incapable of solving, like how to enable relatives to visit care home residents safely.

This raises the question of how should we resolve the tensions between a universal service with a homogeneous set of standards, necessary to some extent to prevent care becoming a postcode lottery, and the need for innovation and diversity to reflect local circumstances and local decision-making. There are no easy answers, but it would help to have a principle that informed decision-making was based upon, however, the NCS was organised.

And, lastly, there is the status of the NCS. There is a strong argument that it should an independent service separate from the NHS. That might appear contrary to the cross-party policy drive of the last ten years to integrate social care with health but that so far has had little obvious success. The chasm between primary and secondary care in the NHS remains and, with Health and Social Care Partnerships (HSCPs) close to financial collapse, the evidence suggests that neither the NHS nor councils have the resources to make them work. So why not use the HSCPs to form the building blocks of the new NCS and fund it independently? That is probably the only way to ensure that care is fully resourced. The NCS could then be designed to interface with the NHS on the one hand, with some community health staff with caring roles transferring over, and even more importantly on the other, with local communities, community services and the informal carers who provide the majority of care in Scotland.

Human rights and a National Care Service are both powerful ideas that could help drive political change. But they will need to be founded on a new set of principles if we are to achieve the sort of radical reform that our care system so urgently requires.

Nick Kempe was Head of Service for Adults and Older People in Glasgow and convenes Common Weal’s Care Reform Group which is developing a blueprint for a National Care Service in Scotland.
Challenging neo-liberal education in a post-Covid world

Brian Boyd and Henry Maitles lay out a wide-ranging critique of what is right and wrong in education.

The Covid pandemic has as a side effect in that it highlights weaknesses and contradictions in structures and focuses on them. Nowhere is this more obvious than in school education. The exam fiasco during the summer highlighted the iniquity of algorithms in managing exam results. It was openly unfair. The inequalities, now much more exposed, led to a student and parent anger that will make a return to the old hidden algorithm much harder.

It is over two decades since Tony Blair declared that his three main priorities were ‘education, education, education’. In this, he was reflecting a worldwide belief that the knowledge economy, whether through graduates or skilled workers, was paramount to the competitiveness of a national economy. The chosen method across the world for improving education was a neo-liberal model, which saw the market as the key focus to ensure change in a system that seemed resistant to any major shift in perspective. This change process was started by conservative-type governments across the world but has been enthusiastically taken up by social democratic governments too.

The impact of this was to introduce the market into education – testing, league tables (of schools, universities, colleges), specialist schools run by unelected and unaccountable group of interests, work intensification and so on. Other aspects, such as humanity, citizenship, diversity, cultural issues and fun were put to one side as schools and universities were gauged on metrics like exam results. Linked in with this was the commercialisation of schools and higher education, which has reached a peak in the USA.

Comprehensive education is now some 55 years old and remains the bedrock of our approach to schooling. It is worth reminding ourselves that when Circular 10/65 (600 in Scotland) was issued by the Labour Government in 1965, the key issues were social class and selection. Against a backdrop of the Qualifying Examination (and 11+), the Robbins Report of 1963 spoke of ‘the pool of untapped ability’. Robert Pedley in his The Comprehensive School (1978) book put it succinctly, saying: ‘if one keeps open the door of full opportunity, many more children will pass through it.’

Our schooling in Scotland is, on the face of it, comprehensive. Our pre-school provision is also as is our primary education. But, are our secondary schools truly comprehensive? The abolition of selection was a key aim of Circular 600, and yet in many cases we have replaced external selection with internal selection. Given that we know there is a gap to bridge in attainment, how can we continue to accept that pupils (especially boys) from disadvantaged backgrounds are most likely to be in ‘bottom sets’? It was these pupils that the now infamous algorithm failed.

All of these issues have emerged again and we need to ask ourselves if we are prepared to follow through on them. As was suggested in the Scottish Parliament, we must track this year’s cohort of university entrants to see if, by allowing teachers’ predictions to stand, any drop in standards is discovered. While we await the outcome of such a longitudinal study, perhaps a question is whether universities should become comprehensive too. The ‘downward incrementalism’ of universities’ insistence of ever higher entrance qualifications, especially in medicine and law, distorts learning and teaching in schools, especially in the senior years.

A ground breaking idea to improve Scottish education had been the Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) in the early 2000s. It was an attempt to rebalance Scottish education by emphasising other aspects of a rounded education: the 4 capacities (successful learners, confident individuals, effective contributors, responsible citizens) were to be of equal importance in the school. In reality, particularly in secondary schools, successful learners, based on exam leaving results, came to be the dominant factor and now effectively is the measure of a good school. This determines curriculum, subject choice and teaching styles. In essence, the tail of the exam waves the dog of the curriculum in secondary schools. The curriculum, thus, suffers from this distortion. CfE has come in for criticism, mainly on issues which were not part of the original report. A study of curriculum change in Scotland demonstrated that once a Working Group or Committee, charged with delivering change, has completed its task, the report is sucked into the centre, changed and rebranded beyond recognition. Thus, it was with CfE and most of the targets for the doubters only came about after the publication of the report.

What we need to do in the coming months is to return to the principles and outcomes. CfE was built upon the previous set of the 5-14 Programme and added Depth, Relevance, Challenge and Enjoyment and Personalisation and Choice. Have these been addressed? The outcomes of successful learners, confident individuals, effective contributors and responsible citizens clearly have not. We are fixated on a narrow definition of learning, namely, that which can be tested or examined. And yet, our post-Covid world is almost certainly going to need confident individuals, effective contributors and responsible citizens. Now since change is inevitable, we would argue that it should be pro-active. We need a curriculum which develops the potential in all children. We have an opportunity to recalibrate our system but we should be under no illusions that it will be easy.

Let us highlight this through assessment. The current national assessment system is not fit for purpose. From testing in P1 to Highers in S5, learning plays second fiddle to examinations. The exams distort teaching and learning, put teachers and students under stress, and tell us very little about the extent to which young people, after some fourteen or fifteen years in the system, have emerged as successful learners, confident individuals, effective contributors or responsible citizens. Chomsky, in Chomsky on MisEducation (2000), has argued that we should reclaim the notion that ‘schooling is a public good and a democratic and a democratic force’. Our current examination system has very little to offer in this regard.

Indeed, a large surprise for us when we moved into the university sector in the 1980s and 1990s after years as high school teachers was that there were almost no exams in most universities in most subjects. After years of being
quizzed or quizzing in school as to exam results – the only measure apparently of the quality of teaching – the university model of a series of modules, the mastery of which depended on a student’s ability to submit an assignment, report or presentation, was actually liberating. It was a measure of whether the student understood and could use the knowledge developed during the learning. Exams, though, tend to be a measure of memory. Learn the content by rote, regurgitate it and then forget it. It is a terrible indictment of our school leaving qualifications – they are based on shallow learning. And, indeed, the decision in early October 2020 to abandon next year’s National 5 exams was added to by a proviso that a rigorous rote learning prelim would be the basis of the results.

So, why do we have these exams? We think that they are a tool of a managerialist education system designed to police teachers and it is a convenient tool for enabling national and local league table placings to be developed – the measure of a ‘good’ school becomes its Higher results. Further, the universities like them as it enables choosing without interviews. It is worth noting that the committee drawing up the CfE proposals in the early 2000s discussed getting rid of exams, but they were told that that would not be feasible. The universities were clear that they wanted them. The exam system heavily discriminates in favour of private schools, schools in better off areas and after school tutoring – the amount of private tutoring going on in better off areas is staggering. Indeed, for many teachers, a key critique of the CfE is that it does not prepare students for the Higher exams. Ironically, it is actually probably correct – the best way of preparing youngsters for rote exams is to develop rote learning earlier.

Further, in the secondary school, over the years, hierarchies of subjects have emerged, in line with universities and their demands. English, maths and the sciences are in the first tier; the social sciences and modern languages come next; thereafter, the so-called practical subjects and the arts find it frustrating that neither schools nor universities value them. Parity of esteem is conspicuous by its absence. Not only that, but it is surely incumbent on a country which strives to be independent to place its culture and its history first and foremost in the education system? While doing so, it might be time to re-visit out-door education. Up until the 1980s and 1990s, Scotland had an enviable array of Outdoor Learning Centres, many of which have been sold off. In a country like Scotland, surely our education system should not only embrace the great outdoors, but should understand how the countryside is managed, who owns it and on what basis changes are made.

The challenge for all of us working in education is to work together to produce a comprehensive system. CfE sought to emphasise that we need to have trust in our teaching profession. ‘Autonomy within guidelines’ was how the 10-14 report phrased it. Intelligent accountability starts from a basis of trust but the recent exam debacle shows that we have a long way to go to achieve it. The Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) and its predecessor, the Examinations Board, has exerted too much influence over syllabuses, examination content and, of course, how pupils are assessed. Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Education (HMIE) traditionally decided, with the minimum of consultation with the profession, how schools were inspected, how they were assessed and graded, what the categories were and, of course, how the reports were published. Is it too much to argue that schools might be trusted to behave professionally with the best interests of pupils at heart?

Egalitarianism, or at least equality of opportunity, was the goal of the comprehensive movement but, as yet, it has not been achieved. Political change, system change and philosophical change may be a starter when we begin our post-Covid review of what had taken place and what kind of country we want Scotland to be. We surely want more equality, more opportunity and more engagement. We also need an education system which promotes creativity, critical thinking and problem solving. We cannot ignore mental health and well-being, and we have challenges to meet in terms of how schools can be part of addressing issues such as obesity.

Finally, there is a mass of research evidence to show that those in deprivation do far worse in terms of educational attainment and, thus, in terms of opportunity than those in better off areas. Whilst there can be the odd ‘blip’, a survey of those schools with lowest attainment generally correlates to those schools with the highest negative social factors. It is now generally accepted that the key predictor of educational attainment is the parental income; that’s why the education gap grows as the wealth gap grows. It is far harder for these kids to move out of poverty and areas of deprivation than we had perhaps previously assumed. This is not to say that schools can do nothing in this but the challenge facing governments is that it needs macro-planning not tinkering at the edges.

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After the acclaim, the rightful pay claim for our key workers

*S*ince the first lockdown, we’ve hailed our key workers as heroes. They are. We owe them a great amount of gratitude. While many of us were tucked up at home, working online, the workers in our food shops and factories, on post and deliveries, in our hospitals, our care homes, our schools, local authorities, and all those providing essential services, put themselves at risk to look after us. Yet while hailed as heroes, they are not paid like heroes. Key workers are paid 8% less on average than others. A third are paid less than £10 an hour. While they continue to look after us, it is now time we look after them. Ultimately, claps and images of rainbows do not pay the bills.

The Scottish Government’s forthcoming Budget is a crucial test of whether it’s prepared to put its money where its mouth is and properly value our key workers. Half of Scotland’s key workers are employed in the public sector, and many key workers in the private sector depend on public sector funding or support. The Scottish Government has rightly distanced itself from the Westminster Spending Review, with Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Kate Forbes MSP, pledging ‘there will be no Tory pay freeze in Scotland’. For all his smooth words, Sunak’s Spending Review is a kick in the teeth for key workers. Far from ‘levelling up’, his attacks on public sector pay are about levelling down. And yet, the Scottish Government’s key policy announcement to date, of a £500 bonus to health and care workers, deserves further scrutiny.

While it represents a welcome show of appreciation for NHS and adult-care workers, it excludes many public sector workers who we have all relied upon as Covid has hit. What about the teachers and school staff that have risked their health to ensure our children are educated? And, the cleaners and cooks in our schools and care homes? And, the refuse collectors in our streets and back courts? And, the civil servants processing benefits to increasing numbers of people across Scotland? And, the firefighters reporting for duty throughout the pandemic? The list could go on.

The payment is also pro-rata and, as a high proportion of the covered workers work part-time, they won’t see anywhere near the £500. Because it is a bonus, it won’t be consolidated into future pay levels or even be pensionable. The Scottish Government should extend its £500 bonus to all public sector key workers who have worked to keep people safe during the pandemic.

Longer term though, a cash bonus does not address the structural issues in the public sector where inequality of pay, low wages and the undervaluing of key skilled roles dominate in so many areas. Over the last decade, public sector workers have seen the value of their real pay fall from consecutive below inflation pay increases. The result has not only been declining levels of pay, but poorer communities. Workers deserve a real pay rise to put money in their pockets now, and in their pensions in the future.

A significant pay rise for poorly paid public sector workers would boost local economies. Well-paid bankers and executives would put their extra money into their offshore accounts. If you put money in the pockets of health workers, carers, and cleaners, they will spend it on basic goods and services in their local area. If ever there was a policy for ‘inclusive growth’, this is it. What’s more, while the Government would pay out more in wages, much of this would be recycled back in the form of tax revenue. Research by the Institute of Public Policy Research suggests more than 40% of the cost of Scottish public sector pay increases would be offset in tax revenue to the Scottish and UK Governments.

A public sector pay increase would also serve as a shock-absorber for many low-income families. Half of key workers with children have a partner who is in non-key work. Many will be on furlough pay of 80% or face an uncertain future. Boosting the pay of key workers can help low-income families deal with the wider economic impacts of coronavirus.

Increasing public sector pay would also narrow the gender pay gap. Women are twice as likely than men to be key workers, making up 82% of care workers and home carers, 77% of cleaners, 96% of nursery nurses and assistants, 92% of child minders, 89% of educational support assistants, and the majority of jobs in Government administration.

Of course, the Scottish Budget must do more than simply increase public sector pay. We need an economic stimulus package to support workers in struggling sectors and huge investment in a worker-led just transition that tackles climate change while creating good quality green jobs in Scotland. And at a UK level, we need further investment, tax reform, corporate governance reform, and an increase in the minimum wage worth more than 18p.

But public sector pay is the litmus test of whether the Scottish Government is willing to properly value those key workers that kept people safe while politicians clapped from their doorsteps. Let’s not pretend there is a lack of money. British billionaires have profit through the pandemic to the tune of £25bn. That is enough to fund a decent pay rise for every public worker in the UK. It is time for politicians to value our key workers in deeds, not just words. The Scottish Government Budget must be the start of that process and fund a proper pay increase for our public sector workers.

*Roz Foyer is the general secretary of the Scottish Trades Union Congress (STUC)*

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Roz Foyer ask whether the Scottish Government will pass or fail the test of paying up.
Progressive consensus versus neo-liberal stagnation

Mike Danson asks what sort of economic renewal and recovery do we want in Scotland.

As countries and governments struggle with the impacts of COVID-19, the positions of the city-regions and nations within Britain have come under scrutiny. The very limited rights and powers of the mayors and councils in the north of England have been revealed by their restricted capacities to cope without the permissions and funding from Westminster. Even for the three Celtic nations, however, the reserving of most monetary, fiscal and other macro-economic levers to the Chancellor has put them in an unenviable position of trying to balance the conflicting demands, priorities, and needs of a range of interest groups and policy areas. Within this complex context, governments in Scotland and Wales have been active in commissioning reports and plans from advisory groups and committees on ways to bring about economic recovery. Think tanks and others from across the political and social spectrums have also been offering their suggestions for reviving and restructuring both immediately and in the longer term.

The reports in the summer of 2020 from these various authorities and agencies actually reveal a good deal of consensus over their promised destinations in terms of industries to be supported, groups to be protected, and inclusive and sustainable elements of their respective strategies. However, there is less agreement over how to get there and often communication of these alternatives paths has diverted discussions away from plans and policies. So, pursuing a just transition to a net zero economy in times of Covid and macro-economic restrictions is recognised by all as necessary but challenging; compromises and priorities then become crucial in discriminating between different approaches. Considering these different reports, therefore, requires both exploring each set of proposals and their common features but also their distinctive paths to a new economic future. On the one hand, some represent a near future driven by the neo-liberal and neo-classical economics of the recent past. On the other hand, some plans are based on a more radical and interventionist worldview.

The series of reports started with a special edition of the Fraser of Allander Institute’s Economic Commentary in June where 17 of Scotland’s economic experts reflected on: the immediate outlook for the economy over the next 12 months; their expected permanent changes to our economy emerging from this crisis; and what each considered the top priority areas for policymakers should be at this time. While this publication offered a range of views and opinions, subsequent outputs offered more focused contributions. The earliest and most publicised ‘official’ report was Towards a Robust, Resilient Wellbeing Economy for Scotland, chaired by, and often called, the (Benny) Higgins report. With neither specific recommendations nor ‘a shopping list’, the report argues for significant and substantial actions and interventions in the economy to avoid the type of 1980s recession and austerity which post-2008 has so needlessly blighted so many lives. The principles underpinning their suggestions include: needing a focus on a robust and resilient, wellbeing economy, and accelerating action to promote wellbeing and Fair Work and tackle inequality by mitigating the risks of unemployment, especially among groups hit hard by the crisis. Clearly nothing wrong with these aspirations as they argue for restoring employment, by prioritising a green investment and education-led recovery. Underpinning all this are calls for supporting freedoms and wealth creation, meaningless without definitions and considerations of equity and equality and so the direction of travel depends on teasing out what these are actually intended to mean. Even the appeals to seize the opportunity for a process of national renewal is fairly neutral as is, critically, the need for economic recovery [to be] underpinned by a new deal with business. Apart from a few interviews by Benny Higgins (for example, Times 5 August 2020), there is a vagueness about the details so that much criticism has been either personal or on the perceived reliance on the private sector to regenerate the economy through state subsidies.

Core to the Higgins strategy seems to be a perhaps reluctant recognition of the need for increased borrowing powers to be granted to the Scottish Government. Interventions such as the proposed Jobs Guarantee Scheme for young people have maybe been overtaken by ‘initiatives’ at Westminster but the peculiarly Scottish elements would rely on the further devolution of borrowing capacity and the establishment of a top-level Council of Business Advisers to decide on economic priorities. While such a representative body would not be unwelcome in a pluralist social and economic environment, as in the richer and fairer societies of the Nordic countries and Germany, there would also be a countervailing and accepted role for organised labour. Despite a former STUC General Secretary being a member of the Higgins-led Advisory Group, there is but one inclusion of unions in the report: ‘genuine workforce engagement, such as trade union recognition’ and no mention - never mind insistence - of the need for a balanced social democratic countervailing power to the role and privileging of capital. Restricting workers’ involvement to benefiting from the practice and enforcement of Fair Work First does not offer a reasonable platform for creating the environment for genuine change.

Although welcoming some aspects, this and related criticisms were made by the STUC, the Wellbeing Economy Alliance (WEA), Common Weal and others.

Recent interviews and analyses have illuminated further the beliefs and expectations that underpin the other significant economic strategy coming from the (centre) right for plotting Scotland’s development. Specifically, the Sustainable Growth Commission established by the SNP in 2016 under the leadership of Andrew Wilson has been criticised before but this was renewed following an extensive feature in the Herald on Sunday (18 October 2020). This was argued in a similar vein to the Higgins report, especially and crucially in terms of its conservatism and lack of ambition of vision for what Scotland could and should aspire to be in a decade’s time. Without wasting space here, it is sufficient to conclude that a recovery based on and effectively limited to a reliance on the market and private sector-led but subsidised growth will not be inclusive, sustainable nor...
promote wellbeing for all. As described by the title of the book by respected economic journalists, Larry Elliott and Dan Atkinson, *Going South: Why Britain will have a Third World Economy by 2014*, a neo-liberal economic future offering a blueprint for the recovery of Scottish capitalism as promoted by ex-bankers holds no reversal from the past nor from the wider UK’s continuing and current trajectory of decline. Contrariwise and represented by the 2020 reports and proposals from Scotland’s other commissions, advisory groups and think tanks, there have been a series of detailed, complementary and feasible visions and roads to a better place.

From the Just Transition Commission, with a broadly based membership which includes several union representatives and members, the interim report of February 2020 was supplemented with specific *Advice for a Green Recovery* in July 2020. The Interim Report made recommendations for actions to: maximise the economic and social opportunities that the move to a net-zero economy by 2045 offers; build upon Scotland’s existing strengths and assets; and understand and mitigate risks that could arise in relation to regional cohesion, equalities, poverty (including fuel poverty), and a sustainable and inclusive labour market. Consistent with this approach, the *Green Recovery* used the following criteria to assess individual measures: Do they set Scotland on a pathway to net-zero? Do they ensure the benefits of climate change action are shared widely, while the costs do not unfairly burden those least able to pay, or whose livelihoods are directly or indirectly at risk? And: will they contribute to a just and fair economic recovery for Scotland once the immediate emergency, created by COVID-19, has subsided? These criteria established a different environment and forum for deliberating what should be pursued for a green recovery from the Covid pandemic.

Based on substantial and considered evidence, recommendations were made for immediate actions to help build a fairer, greener economy: boost investment in warmer homes; back buses and support the supply chain; help the rural economy by helping Scotland’s nature; maintain and create new jobs for oil and gas workers; align skills development – for young and old – with the net-zero transition; and, give a clear sense of direction and attach conditions to funding. Each of these was supported with evidence, rationale and contribution to achieving a just green recovery and offered specific proposals for practical actions.

In effect, these were the headlines and short-term interventions derived from the evidence of sector, rural, community and union analysts and representatives. Reports from the STUC in its *Analysis of Infrastructure Investment options for Economic Recovery*, the Climate Emergency Response Group's (CERG) *Eight Policy Packages for Scotland’s Green Recovery*, Community Land Scotland’s ‘Built-In Resilience: Community Landowners’ Response to the Covid-19 Crisis’, and North Ayrshire Council as the first Community Wealth Building authority in Scotland informed and coalesced around a set of understandings, analyses and prescriptions for how Scotland and the Scottish people could pursue a more inclusive, prosperous and sustainable future. Proposed interventions were costed and employment and income impacts identified and quantified. Recently, the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) Scotland offered interventions in ‘Better than Before: A Scotland Built on Social, Economic, and Climate Justice’, echoing and reflecting the foregoing analyses and prognoses.

Their suggestions around paying for the pandemic ironically display some of the limitations of the neo-liberal approaches, specifically dependency upon agreement of Westminster. However, in promoting concepts of social solidarity and a new social contract, IPPR Scotland recognises potential for radical underpinnings to recovery. In ‘How Productivity Could Deliver Inclusive Growth in Scotland’, their economic modelled approach complements ideas of the circular economy, improved low and precariat wages although centralised industrial structures and ownership patterns are neglected in the analysis. Reports from each of these bodies, the Just Transition Commission, the Common Weal’s *Resilient Scotland* programme and the principles embedded into their respective strategic agendas (including WEA and embedding the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals into Scottish economic strategy) offer a coherent long-term vision from a workers’ and citizens’ perspective to complement these immediate proposals.

The high degrees of collective bargaining, union membership, gender equality and tax and spend that underpin the success of the Nordic economies and societies display the elements that would support moves to an inclusive, sustainable and wealthy Scotland as envisaged by the STUC and others. Indeed, partnership working which is the foundation of their respective models is at the heart of many of the organisations proposing Scottish economic paths for the coming years, from Business for Scotland to Common Weal. Where there are differences and gaps across these programmes and plans they tend to be around the limits and constraints to powers and responsibilities devolved to Scotland (and other nations and regions). Without devolution of powers over employment law, procurement and the utilities, much enhanced borrowing capacity and the ability to vary taxes on wealth (including over dividend and savings incomes), all the more progressive and radical strategies will be restricted to marginal variations and ameliorations from the dominant Westminster neo-liberalism. While all of the publications reviewed here recognise these limitations, without being able to address costings and funding implications and so their constitutional requirements the STUC’s *The People’s Recovery: A Different Track for the Scottish Economy*, for example, will struggle to take us onto a different path to prosperity and wellbeing.

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Misreporting Labour anti-semitism: Zionists and the right-wing now rule the roost

Sandy Hobbs finds the EHRC report to be deeply flawed, amounting to a politically inspired hatchet job.

In October 2020, the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) published a report entitled 'Investigation into Anti-semitism in the Labour Party'. Media coverage emphasised the ways in which the party appears in a bad light. In particular, the party was found by the investigators to have behaved ‘unlawfully’ in dealing with complaints of anti-semitism. However, a carefully reading of the report cast some serious doubts on the way in which the commission went about its investigation. Judgements about whether actions were or were not ‘unlawful’ might appear relatively straightforward. As someone without specialist legal training, I am loath to offer specific criticisms of that side of the report.

However, at the beginning of the section headed ‘unlawful acts’, I note that it specifies finding the use of ‘anti-semitic tropes’ and statements that claims of anti-semitism were ‘fake or smears’. There is no critical analysis of ‘tropes’, for example, on how to distinguish between anti-semitic ones and anti-Zionist ones. I find it astonishing that the writers implicitly assume that no one could conscientiously claim some complaints of anti-semitism are ill-founded and malicious. Someone whose claim the extent of anti-semitism is exaggerated is shown to be unfounded can only be labelled ‘antisemitic’ if there is other evidence of that person’s hostile behaviour towards Jewish people. Put another way, even if an individual’s argument that a particular claim of anti-semitism proves false, does that mean the person making that argument is anti-semitic? Further, on the issue of ‘unlawfulness’, I note that Jewish Voice for Labour, in a message posted on its website on 25 November 2020, states that its legal advisers have not secret information, but it seems not to have occurred to the report’s authors to relate it to their understanding of what was going on with respect to anti-semitism in the party during the period they were investigating. In addition, in 2019 Greg Philo and other academics published the book, Bad News for Labour, which deals with anti-semitism claims in the wider context of media coverage and inner party differences – see review in Scottish Left Review 115, January/February 2020. Moreover, the EHRC report mentions, but seems to overlook the significance of, the fact that when Jennie Formby was General Secretary of the party, she sometimes used personal e-mails rather than party ones because she did not trust some of the staff. The notion of ‘a culture’ ignoring or accepting anti-semitism which they put forward is a naive one. Referring to inner party differences would have led to a more meaningful interpretation of anti-semitism claims.

Corbyn’s election as leader obviously came as shock to many party members. Since he represented his party was found by the investigators to have behaved ‘unlawfully’ in dealing with complaints of anti-semitism. However, a carefully reading of the report cast some serious doubts on the way in which the commission went about its investigation. Judgements about whether actions were or were not ‘unlawful’ might appear relatively straightforward. As someone without specialist legal training, I am loath to offer specific criticisms of that side of the report.

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States into which a map of Israel had been inserted, with the commentary ‘problem solved’. Shah later apologised and withdrew the post. However, Livingston said publicly that what she had done was not anti-semitic, that she had been put under pressure by the ‘Israel lobby’, who exaggerated the extent of anti-semitism in the party. The EHRC’s report does not attempt to directly refute Livingston’s argument. Instead, it stresses the extent to which Jewish Labour members had been upset by what he said. The failure to explicitly make the case of Shah’s post being anti-semitic is particularly unfortunate when one notes that the ‘put Israel in the USA’ joke was taken from a post by Norman Finkelstein, an ethnic Jew who is critical of Israel. I also note that although the feelings of Jewish members are considered relevant, there is no attempt to analyse those feelings. It seems to me that a Jewish person with a strong emotional attachment to Israel could be upset by the joke, but that in itself is not evidence of the joke’s anti-semitism.

It is also worth pointing out that although Jewish feelings are considered important, no reference is made to the feelings of left-wing members like Livingston and Corbyn, who have a history of anti-racism but find themselves accused of anti-semitism. Finally, I note that on p27 of the report it is said that Labour Party members are legally able to comment on the scale of anti-semitism in the party based on own experience. Livingston was a member at the time, so in what respects were his remarks illegitimate? I happen to believe that some of the things that Livingston said at the time were ill-judged. As a fellow-socialist, I would suggest to him that he should have acknowledged the possibility that there was some anti-semitic harassment going on in the party and that saying Hitler was a Zionist is a crude way of making a historical point and unlikely to be taken well by some Jewish people. But it is not anti-semitic.

The second case described in detail is that of a local councillor, Pam Bromley. On balance I think the EHRC criticisms of her have more substance than their criticisms of Livingston. She is quoted as saying she had had unfavourable reactions to a meme she posted on Jacob Rothschild. She claimed that this was part of a critique of capitalism. There is nothing unusual in a socialist attacking capitalist but why choose this particular one to name? It is difficult to avoid the suspicion that the intention is to stress the role of Jews in the capitalist ruling class. This is especially so when taken alongside a post expressing satisfaction at an Israeli space craft crashing. She also justified the Rothschild meme on the basis that, acknowledging Nazi use of Rothschild in their ‘propaganda’, we should not ignore ‘truth’ for the sake of being ‘tactful’. Nazi ill-treatment of Jews went considerably beyond ‘propaganda’!

Most of the Pam Bromley posts cited refer to ‘fake’ accusations of anti-semitism. The case EHRC makes against her would be stronger if they could demonstrate that most such accusations are not ‘fake’. However, to do that, they would have had to make some attempt to assess the actual extent of anti-semitic activity in Labour. Instead, they seem to simply assume that accusations are true. If they had taken more note of the conflicts within the party, they would have understood why some members might be motivated to make false or exaggerated claims and other members might suspect such fake claims might be made!

The EHRC report authors do not seem to understand the Labour Party. If the party is trying to confront problems associated with anti-semitism and Zionism, that report is unlikely to be helpful. Apart from the Foreword attributed to the Interim Chair, Caroline Waters, the EHRC report does not name any individual authors. Accordingly, my criticisms of the report have treated it as an institutional document. However, as I finished writing, The Guardian reported the ‘lead author’, barrister Alasdair Henderson, had been criticised for certain activities on social media including showing hostility to Black Lives Matter protesters. Although my main concern has been this report’s mistreatment of the Labour Party, it appears that a broad examination of the EHRC’s personnel is needed. This is ever more so in the light of the appointment of new Commissioners.

Sandy Hobbs is a Labour member and a Senior Research Fellow at the University of the West of Scotland.

UCS work-in 50th anniversary

Celebrating the 50th Anniversary of the Upper Clyde Shipbuilders’ Work-in 1971-2

in association with

This play will tour this year – see http://www.townsendproductions.org.uk/shows/upper-clyde/
Labour at the crossroads – which way will it turn?

Tommy Kane analyses changes inside Labour and calls for the left to stay, fight and win.

When Keir Starmer won the Labour leadership, he did it on the back of a series of promises. Competence, he said, and unity. I will, he said, carry on where Jeremy Corbyn left off. He flashed his ten pledges and a track record in the class struggle in a tear-jerking campaign video in which he stood alongside dockers, miners, printers, and green campaigners. For the left then, there was some comfort. Labour was to be ‘Under New Management’ but there would still be a place for all in the broad church and the policy legacy from the 2017 and 2019 general elections would be retained.

The events of the past eight months suggest hollow promises were made. Mass suspensions, questionable pay-outs, sackings, policies backtracked. The Covert Intelligence Bill [aka SpyCaps Bill]. There is more than a lingering suspicion that this type of stuff wouldn’t have quite made the cut for the campaign film.

The progressive, inclusive perception looks as if it was designed to attract and placate the left before reneging quickly and aggressively when electoral objectives were met. Suspensions, silencing of debate in branches and threats of expulsions make an appealing calling card to leave in the hands of his new target market on the road to ‘acceptability’ - high-end donors, the Murdoch press, and the City of London.

There were clues. In April 2020, George Osborne welcomed Starmer, saying: ‘After a 5 year absence, Britain has an opposition again.’ Osborne’s issue with Corbyn was always the threat he posed to economic orthodoxy, his appetite for challenging vested interests, and desire to move the party, the government and the country away from the narrow limits of parliamentarism. In Starmer, Osborne recognised someone he could do business with. Labour was now less the right kind of Opposition and more the right kind of opposition because the right was being reassured that if Labour won the basic tenets will remain: that corporate boats won’t be rocked and socialism won’t replace capitalism.

In the time of the pandemic, some kind of alternative vision would offer comfort to the left. But under the new management, there has been little or none. Scotland is a perfect example. In the face of polls suggesting a majority in favour of independence and an outright majority for pro-referendum parties in May 2021, Starmer in late December 2020 finally got round to talking about his leadership campaign pledge to: ‘[p]ush power, wealth and opportunity away from Whitehall. A federal system to devolve powers – including through regional investment banks and control over regional industrial strategy. Abolish the House of Lords – replace it with an elected chamber of regions and nations’.

Understanding the need for change was positive. But there was nothing on federalism, regional investment banks or industrial strategy. What he did say feels like too little too late. More detail is urgently needed, otherwise it could be seen as a defensive holding position as opposed to a genuine belief in the need to redistribute power and wealth. But, how does redistributing wealth tie in with the repeated line that now is not the time to raise taxes and the refusal to countenance a wealth tax? What constitutes the so-called broken status quo? Is it the economic as well as the political status quo? Is the planned end game federalism or just more powers for Scotland? How and why will any of it lead to ending child poverty, creating good and secure jobs, and the level of investment needed to create a green industrial revolution that the Scottish Parliament, not the financial sector, is in control off?

Labour also has to fix its opposition on another referendum and how it speaks to the people it’s trying to win back. Doubling down, as Starmer did, on unionist language, antagonising voters your trying to win back, by describing them as separatists is, to say the least, unhelpful. As is the Labour leadership’s fixation on blocking indyref2, which plays into the hands of the SNP. Scotland’s right to determine its own future should be recognised. Then he could get on with interrogating the substance of independence and why it is a simplistic, flawed and economically damaging response to the broken status quo.

More big signposts are needed elsewhere. Post-Covid and post-Brexit, what is the Labour plan? As a slogan, ‘I’m not Jeremy Corbyn’ is not going to fly. People are desperate for a vision that reassures, protects and offers hope in these dark times. This means a wide-ranging, inclusive set of ideas that can be offered as Labour attempts to reach out. At the moment, the preponderant direction of travel is still inward, as Starmer and Labour’s General Secretary double-down on the factional war they had vowed to end.

Instead, at Starmer’s behest Labour is having another argument with itself about its political approach. Is Labour here to challenge political and economic orthodoxies or to conform? Should Labour embrace triangulation and the accompanying need to dilute principles and values? Should Labour mean what it says and say what it means? Should racist callers to phone-in shows be challenged or should Labour stay quiet and just be pleased with the airtime?

Polling shows members think the policy programme set out in 2017 and 2019 should be retained. They want the party to tackle injustice and push the limits of political parameters, go beyond what is acceptable to the Square Mile and offer a genuinely new alternative. Despite this, it is not part of the Starmer strategy.

Provoking the membership in this context looks deliberate. Suspending Corbyn and continuing to withhold the whip even after his membership was given back was obviously going to lead to members leaving or reacting in a way that would be used as a justification to suspend.

It’s a strategy that has seen Labour lose tens of thousands of members. The suspicion is that this is not unwelcome at party HQ and amongst many in the Parliamentary Labour Party because they don’t feel comfortable with a mass movement or too many socialists as they fear for their loss of control in
a living, breathing wider movement. They would rather see the membership shackled, broken in internal elections, far away from policy, and under the hold of a centralised operation that controls selections and assigns constituency parties with a list of suitable topics for debate.

That level of control requires a smaller membership and every single provocation should be seen in that light. That’s why the left must act wisely in the face of this provocation and do the opposite of its intended outcome - stay in the party.

There is no doubt the calculators will have been out at HQ. The small donations garnered from a committed membership can be replaced by big donors. With a little boardroom courting and a ticket to the VIP section now known as the ‘Leader’s Circle’ (which for £5,000 buys a pre-conference speech brunch and a direct line to the office of the Leader of the Opposition), captains of finance and industry will leap on board. At the same time, just enough must be done to keep the Unions on side. These are careful calculations, and an intricate balancing act. The very definition of triangulation.

The longer-term concern is there are many who would like to sever the historic link from the wider movement. There is a sense traditional campaigning will change with less members needed. Facebook over door knocking. Docility rather than political principle will be the characteristics required of the lay membership in an increasingly centralised and de-democratised party - in direct contrast to Corbyn’s democracy review and his aim to re-democratisise Labour.

None of this is new. Debates over Labour’s direction repeat themselves over time. Socialists and social democrats perennially debate what direction Labour should take. This time, however, we are at a unique juncture. Old debates and framing will not do. Never have we faced an impending climate catastrophe, a global pandemic, the worst recession in more than 300 years, Brexit and the break-up of Britain, and all at the same time.

The pandemic has exposed the structural inequalities at the heart of our political and economic system. Pre-covid health inequalities and life expectancy differentials were a national shame. The pandemic has again made clear that it’s the poorest who suffer ill health the most. People are starving. If not for a footballer and UNICEF, more would be going hungry. This cannot continue. Britain needs a Labour Party worthy of the name. Now is the time for the Labour leadership to be in tune with, and translate, the shift in public mood seen earlier this year into tangible changes. As the clapping fades, Labour must get on with presenting a vision that rewards our workers with proper pay and conditions.

There is still time to start focusing attention outside Labour and away from internal non-sense. Keir Starmer and Anneliese Dodds must surely understand the new public mood and that of the membership. Given the exceptional circumstances, retaining the 2017 and 2019 policy agenda is vital. It actually needs to be built on even more radically than how Corbyn and McDonnell presented it.

There is a pressing need for a vision of a reconstructed and democratised economy where the value of people and their place in society are properly and fairly aligned. Post-virus public and common ownership and taking austerity off the table for good are desperately needed. As is developing a green, industrial strategy that is not left to the vagaries of the free market. Previously outlined by Rebecca Long-Bailey, this thankfully is also accepted by Ed Miliband. Labour must also deliver on the growing public appetite for a wealth tax.

In Scotland, Starmer can stand beside Richard Leonard and outline a shared vision for a Britain that redistributes power from Westminster and wealth from the City of London. He can appeal to those who have left Labour and those who may or may not believe in independence but do believe in the Scottish peoples’ right to choose their own constitutional future and just want a fairer, better society. He can map out Labour’s vision for change and make the case that there should be a third option on any future referendum that is progressive, forward thinking and serves democracy.

Starmer can heal Labour and still become the leader who promised unity, not division. He can begin by rescinding his unilateral decision to suspend the whip from Corbyn. The coming weeks and months ahead are crucial. If, however, his leadership continues on his current path then many socialists in question whether they should stay.

Stay. Organise. Agitate. Educate. Labour is flawed and it always has been. But it remains the best vehicle for progressive change. Talk of setting up another party is fanciful. Its formation would take up too much of the one commodity that is ebbing away: time. The left has strength and if it chooses to harness it. It has to do so. After all, it’s not just a fight for the soul of Labour - it is also the fight for our people and the planet.

Tommy Kane is a Labour Party member and sits on the Scottish Left Review editorial committee.
The Say No Party – the battle is just beginning to stop the Stalinism of Sturgeon

Kenny MacAskill reviews how the SNP will act after its leadership received a recent bloody lip.

Where now for the SNP after its annual national conference in November? A virtual event is always likely to have the atmosphere of a football match without fans - interesting to watch but lacking the passion and intensity, never mind conviviality of the real thing. The SNP conference proved to be no different and, as with a football match, it was more the result that mattered - though in this case not the final score but the outcome of the internal elections.

The inevitability of the atmosphere was ensured by a leadership that sought to make resolutions as anodyne as possible and ensure that debates, whilst still having some fine speeches, lacked the fire and cut and thrust of a radical motion to a packed auditorium. Indeed, such was the insipid nature of the compositcd motions and the ensuing grievance felt by many that an alternative fixture hosted allowing for popular resolutions that had been neutered to be heard proved to be hugely popular. Indeed, it was better attended than some parts of the official fixture.

That the outcome of the elections mattered to the leadership though was shown by actions before it happened and the reaction of some after it occurred. Prior to the voting, leadership attack dogs were unleashed heaping both invective on supposed factionalism and castigating individuals perceived as a threat. Yet criticising internal groupings within the party was both nonsensical and hypocritical.

All political parties are broad churches and few if any agree with every policy, let alone word. Of course, groups which seek to infiltrate and undermine are in another category but nobody was suggesting that of those involved in the SNP. Likewise, democratic centralism has fallen with the Communist Party and political parties are there to debate and deliver change and not act as leadership fan clubs. The hypocrisy was also evident in the heavy promotion by the leadership machine that took place for chosen favourites or anointed ones. It happens in all parties and under all regimes, but it was obvious if not flagrant in this case, especially as conference neared and their fears grew.

Moreover, internal debate is healthy and can sometimes even be cathartic. Rather than running from discussion on major issues that divide, having a passionate debate and reaching an agreed conclusion can unite a party. That has been seen in the SNP on past controversial issues ranging from the Constitutional Convention to NATO. The neutering of important and topical issues at this most recent conference simply spurred the clamour for change.

That change was by no means a tidal wave but it was still a sea change from what had gone before. Many senior players and leadership favourites were ousted, to be replaced by individuals that had been denounced, either specifically as to who they were or more generally for being on a list that endorsed them. The petulant reaction of some and the almost hysterical social media shrieking of others that followed the result also confirmed the leaderships antipathy to the outcome.

The election victors were an amalgam of groupings and, indeed, individuals. Though lists of nominees to vote for were coordinated, there were still wide variances amongst them. The alliance included those seeking to protect women’s rights, the Common Weal group from the left and old party stalwarts. What united them was an opposition to a ‘woke’ faction perceived as having latched on to the SNP as well as a desire for a firmer push for independence.

The alliance represented a desire of many to reclaim their party and put it back on a more radical road on independence and other social and economic issues. There was genuine anger within the party on policies that were moving the party to a position of concentrating on gender and identity issues, rather than country or even class. The debate had been simmering amongst parliamentary representatives and especially on social media for some time but this was the first opportunity for rank-and-file members to express their views, and it was to be prove pretty overwhelming.

Of course, as in all political parties in government, power remains with the Leader and direction is still largely set from Ministerial office. However, it’s clear that notwithstanding that iron rule of politics, some change will still come, and more importantly internal party debate will accentuate and accelerate on the fundamental issue of independence and how it’s to be achieved. But as well as policy changes, there could well be further personnel ones.

For to all intents and purposes, it was also a vote against the management of the party. Trust in the party’s administrative machine has been eroding and much ire has been fixed upon the Chief Executive. As the party leader’s and, indeed First Minister’s spouse, many felt his position untenable when she acceded to those offices. Since then, respect for and faith in party HQ has been diminishing for a variety of reasons from election handling to membership disputes. As he now finds himself in the eye of the storm at the Salmond Inquiry, he may well find that for political staff, as with government ministers, when you yourself become the story then your days are numbered. Whether by his departure or simply the greater scrutiny afforded by new office holders, changes at SNP HQ seem inevitable. With an election looming that can only be a good thing as a trust is essential and needs rebuilt.

The first policy casualty looks set to be Gender Recognition Reform (Scotland) Bill that has proven so divisive within the party. Given the heavy defeat of the ‘Woke Brigade’, allied with increasing tensions, an early burial of that policy seems likely. With a parliamentary defeat almost certain, continuing the self-inflicted harm is frankly ludicrous. It has already seen many women abandon their membership and continuing with it will only worsen that. Hopefully, the make-up of the new NEC can ensure its culled along with its leading proponents.

The Hate Crime and Public Order Bill has caused similar, if slightly less concern, though abandoning that is
more problematic given its position in the legislative machinery. However, the likelihood is of further concessions to try to ameliorate concerns. The danger though is of leaving the Bill so anodyne that it’s acceptable to opponents but ends up leaving both them and proponents equally dissatisfied with the final outcome.

However, the most significant debate in the SNP, as indeed arguably in the country, remains on the constitution and a second independence referendum. The leadership closed down debate on ‘Plan B’ as it’s called at conference but the interest in it was shown by the attendance at the parallel gathering. With the political makeup of the new NEC avoiding debate is untenable. Moreover, as the consequences of Brexit are felt, Boris Johnson remains intransigent on agreeing to a Section 30 (S30) Order and an election nears, then a strategy will need detailed.

Already, the leadership has required to offer an Assembly for debate. That will be wholly inadequate and will likely just increase the clamour for an alternative to a ‘Boris veto’, as it is termed. With the court case on the ability to hold a referendum without such an order proceeding, it’s another factor to be woven in.

At the moment, the leadership position is that there’ll be a referendum in 2021. It’s a mantra chant that simply echoes what was shouted in 2020. Yet there was never any likelihood of a poll in Autumn 2020 even before coronavirus befell the globe. So long as the SNP policy requires the concession of a S30 Order by Johnson, then it’s difficult to see how that’s practically possible.

Even if, as seems to be the hope of leadership loyalists, Johnson blinks after the May elections, then the practicalities of convening a new Scottish Government, agreeing terms with an existing British Government and, thereafter, getting the approval of the Electoral Commission for a campaign period - let alone poll - all mean that 2021 will be impossible.

There is no evidence that Johnson will fold in a political poker game which would leave the SNP high and dry having granted him that absolute veto. This will be a rather strange position for a party that bases itself on the rights of the Scottish people to find itself in. But even if Johnson does concede one then, other problems arise so long as it’s the agreement of Westminster not just the will of the Scottish people that’s required.

Perhaps, the Tories would feel that a snap poll would be best for them. Possible. But if it follows an electoral defeat why would they? More likely they’d seek to delay until what they would consider to be the optimum time for them - perhaps, 2023 or 2024. By which time a Scottish Government devoid of fiscal levers will be reaping the whirlwind of poverty and unemployment caused by a cocktail of austerity, Brexit and coronavirus. Meanwhile, a UK government having resolved the enemy abroad in the EU can turn its attentions inwards and northwards to Scotland. Britain will also more likely have stabilised from the convulsions of Brexit and maybe even made have a new PM.

Moreover, besides timing, there’s no guarantee that conditions won’t be added that would undermine the independence campaign. It could be as crass as 1979 (with the 40% rule amendment) or could be more subtle. Either way, assumptions by the SNP leadership that it’ll simply be a rerun of 2014 seem naïve in the extreme and ignore the history of the British state.

With Britain never having been in a weaker position since wartime and the situation for Scotland worsening by the day, with the threats from Tory constitutional, economic and social policies, pressure will only increase upon the SNP leadership. A way out may be offered by the court case on whether a S30 Order is required though it would still require a change of heart, as well as the indication of an intention to proceed before May’s Poll.

Recalling Robin Williams in The Dead Poets’ Society, the SNP’s various ‘Mr Keatings’ have the courage the Scottish Government’s Lord Advocate clearly lacks. In the event of the court case being unsuccessful, then the clamour to make the election a plebiscite would only increase. That would probably be a step to far for the current leadership though many rank and file seek it.

Of course, politics is driven not just by policies but by events. There are issues, if not icebergs, heading the SNP’s way. They won’t be without consequence and may well increase internal party pressure for more radical action. Notwithstanding that with the major issue remaining the constitution and the opposition remaining hapless, then it’s hard to anything other than continued SNP dominance. The tectonic plates have shifted between Scotland and England, as once geology brought them together, politics is now pushing them apart. The constitutional issue now transcends everything including perhaps political parties.

The party leadership would do well to remember the 2003 election. There the SNP did badly and was the story. The situation seems reversed now with Labour facing even further roll-back, as the SNP experienced back then. But it shouldn’t be forgotten that although Labour remained dominant in constituency seats, their list vote broke to a variety of parties including Socialists, Greens and even a Pensioners’ Party. With some women’s votes having already haemorrhaged from the SNP to a Women’s list party, vacillation in independence campaign. It could be possible. But if it follows an electoral defeat, it’s the agreement of Westminster not just the will of the Scottish people that’s required.

Kenny MacAskill is the (SNP) MP for East Lothian
The struggle for Scotland: from marching to movement for the moment at hand

Keir McKechnie reports on how AUOB is changing not just to meet the times but to shape them too.

Support for the Union has never been more fragile. There have nearly 20 successive polls showing a majority in favour of independence. Parties favouring a break with Britain are on course to win a significant majority in the Scottish parliamentary elections in May. Perhaps most significantly, 72% of under 35-year olds would vote ‘yes’ in an independence referendum.

The SNP has clearly benefited from the Tories’ disastrous and deadly blundering of the coronavirus crisis. Despite many problems and limitations of the SNP’s handling, there is no doubt its approach appears more competent and caring than the Tories’. Yet, all is not well in the independence movement. The SNP leadership has come under sharpening criticism for its over centralised control of the party’s agenda and its lack of a convincing strategy for a second independence referendum. At the November SNP conference, the ‘left-leaning’ Common Weal Group won 11 seats on the National Executive Committee and delegates voted for Chris Hanlon as the new ‘policy chief’ in preference to leadership loyalist, Alyn Smith, who had attacked what he described as ‘factionalism’ in the party.

Another important development has been the beginnings of a new grassroots membership organisation initiated by pro-independence organisation, All Under One Banner (AUOB). Since 2104, AUOB has organised many demonstrations across Scotland, culminating in 200,000 marching through Edinburgh in October 2019. Ninety thousand turned out in Glasgow in January 2020 on a windswept, rainy Saturday to show their opposition to a new Tory government which Scotland did not vote for.

Unfortunately, many on the left in Scotland are failing to engage with this growing movement and dismiss it as a group of flag waving, narrow-minded nationalists. Former SNP MP, George Kerervan, was able to see its radical potential and working class nature when he described those marching under AUOB in The National in February 2020 as ‘the biggest working class movement since Solidarnosc’. Anyone who positively engaged with the demonstrations found a strong working class, anti-Tory sentiment, people open to anti-racist arguments, support for refugees and migrants and a recognition radical action is needed to tackle global warming and devastating climate change.

Without the activity of AUOB and the thousands of other independence supporters and local ‘Yes’ groups, who continue to campaign across Scotland, it is doubtful whether support for independence would have remained as strong as it is. AUOB held an Assembly for ‘Yes’ groups and independence supporters in February 2020 with two further online assemblies in November 2020. The end result was the election of an inaugural 15-person National Committee, elected from a franchise of over 1,200 people who registered for the Assemblies and charged with creating a new mass and democratic membership organisation in 2021. So how can the new organisation become something different and more relevant than what has gone before?

Our aim is to build a mass grassroots membership organisation based on radical action to win independence. The mass demonstrations have built the confidence of the movement and won over new sections to support and campaign for independence. The leadership from the SNP has been lacklustre to say the least and it has no strategy to confront the Tories if a request from the Scottish Government for a Section 30 Order is refused. The new mass membership organisation has been set up to help unite the movement, intensify action and act independently of the SNP leadership. The assemblies highlighted a desire to build support amongst new audiences - trade unionists, young people, the anti-racist movement, and climate justice campaigners.

We need to move beyond politicians who solely rely on a parliamentary strategy. Mass campaigning and civil disobedience, if necessary, need to play a part to make Scotland ungovernable for the British state. It is vital that trade unionists and socialists get behind the campaign. The British state has been no friend to the working class across Britain. It is in all our interests that it is broken apart. Working class unity does not depend on borders, but instead on mutual respect and solidarity.

The Scottish Parliament elections will be a massive opportunity to sink the Tories, reject austerity, and move beyond the current COVID disaster. However, having a pro-independence majority in Holyrood is not enough to win independence. We need a leadership in the independence movement willing to go beyond legalistic manoeuvres or those who are limited by fears of upsetting the courts or institutions like the EU.

We need a movement in the streets, schools and colleges and, crucially, in workplaces. It is vital that the left and unions support Scotland’s democratic right to have a second independence referendum. The STUC and UNISON have made encouraging changes to their position in that direction. Labour supporters for independence should be relaunched and would be welcomed with open arms. AUOB does not endorse any single party in Scotland committed to independence. My personal view is that the new organisation should adopt the same position and that it must avoid becoming a vehicle for continuing the internal disputes currently taking place within the SNP.

Our focus will be building a membership-led body which will be launching a series of public meetings, online rallies, and mass demos in 2021. Opportunities exist to fight for a radical transformation of Scotland, to reject neo-liberalism and move beyond the limits of a pro-business, low wage tax haven for big business strategy espoused by the SNP’s Growth Commission. The left in Scotland needs to get on board. The independence movement needs you and you need us.

Writing in a personal capacity, Keir McKechnie is the All Under One Banner (AUOB) Chief Steward and member of newly elected National Membership Organisation National Committee.
Self-determination for Scotland: do we have Lenin’s courage?

Konrad Rekas ask those who want to be more than counted to stand up now.

What do we need political parties for in Scotland? For everyday management or for just one issue, i.e., independence. If independence is won, then what? And, which is better: technocratic parties that stifle debate or ideological formations with a programme, or at least a vision of the country’s future? And, though perhaps premature today, what will the Scottish political scene look like after independence – will it see the collapse of the SNP or at least breaking the party’s monopoly on representing the right aspirations of our nation? These are the pressing political questions of the time for those concerned with self-determination for Scotland.

While we have seen many assessments concluding that the SNP’s strategy is idling, or at least that it’s a wee bit stale after 13 years in office, most concern themselves with the issue of increasing the quantity of pro-independence MSPs. Almost nobody looks at how to increase the quality of Scottish politics (especially of the pro-independence side). And, there is something paradoxical in the expectation that such a fundamental change as gaining independence and establishing a new state will be carried out by a party as deeply conservative in its ideology and way of thinking as the SNP.

Many in the ‘Yes’ movement have come to the only possible and logical conclusion that to gain additional pro-independence MSPs from the list seats, a new third party is needed and one that is not the Scottish Greens. Indeed, we may need two such third parties. But the Alliance for Independence (now Action for Independence) and ‘Max the Yes’ focused almost only on these mathematical calculations and the Independence for Scotland party has only been able to distinguish itself from SNP over gender recognition. Polls showing about majority support for SNP have not depressed the supporters of ‘the new third party’ idea.

It is into this mix that there is an opportunity for the forces that propose more than ‘tactical voting’ and reject the technocracy and managerialism of the parties we already have. In doing so, they can establish an alternative vision of independence that put equitable economic progress at its centre. At the same time, they can advance the notion that a (Scottish) parliamentary majority may be necessary but not sufficient to achieve independence.

So, let’s be under no illusions: we will not get independence just by managing a wee bit better than Westminster. This is not a watchman election. We do not just need a better manager - but a breakthrough party. In 1917, in Russia, everyone asked: is there a party that will take on this responsibility? And, one man got up saying, ‘There is such a party!’ It was Vladimir Ilyich Lenin. Is there anyone like that in Scotland today?

Konrad Rekas 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.

Resistance that beats - to a beat - can be beautiful

Many readers of Scottish Left Review will likely know the Rock Against Racism (RAR) movement intimately—that political and cultural phenomenon played no small part in the movement to defeat the National Front Nazis.

We are the Glasgow branch of Love Music Hate Racism. We stand firmly in the tradition of RAR. We organise gigs, stages at festivals, talks and panel discussions, and we work with other anti-racism organisations to raise money and build the resistance.

We believe music can galvanise a movement and act as an urgent call to arms—that’s why we’ve produced an album featuring the best and brightest acts on the Scottish music scene, united against racism.

The Beautiful Resistance stands for unity, solidarity and justice. It is a loud, proud and unafraid response to a world that is becoming more polarised by the day, and includes spoken word poetry and excerpts from speeches by Black Lives Matter and Stand Up To Racism campaigners.

Music can create joy and stamp out hate. It’s the passing on of old songs and the creation of new ones. It’s sharing what we have in common and celebrating diversity. Sharing music together makes us happy—the antithesis to hate. When we are united by joy, it makes it harder for them to divide us. When we stand together in solidarity, we cannot be silenced. This is what our album stands for. This is what The Beautiful Resistance is all about.

Listen and stream until your heart’s content and order your copy here: lovemusichaterracismglasgow.bandcamp.com

Love Music Hate Racism Glasgow (lmhr.gla@gmail.com, https://www.facebook.com/GlasgowLMHR)
Britain after Brexit: footloose and fancy free for capricious capitalism

Vince Mills assesses the Brexit deal and warns of imminent dangers.

After what seemed like interminable debate and disagreement, on 30 December 2020, MPs voted 521:73 for the EU (Future Relationship) Bill based on the UK-EU Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA). There is a fairly simple, but accurate way of describing the agreement: the Tories have taken the neo-liberal framework constructed by the EU and replaced it with one made in Britain. We should not really be surprised at this. The Tory faction Boris Johnson represents believes in a footloose, global capitalism, unencumbered as much as possible by regulation, advancing the interests of the London based finance sector in, but crucially beyond, the EU.

For its part, the EU since its inception has been fundamentally committed to the market over democracy. Created by capitalists representing the interests of large corporations with a view to implementing common strategies to defeat resistance by organised workers without reference to national democratic structures, it has been on a steady journey towards its own model of neo-liberalism.

While they differ on how capitalism in its neo-liberal phase is best advanced – nation state or supranational institutions- their common espousal of market supremacy suffuses the TCA. We are invited to applaud the deal because of the benefits from ‘the liberalised market access arrangements’ or ‘investment liberalisation’ or ‘some of the most liberalising and modern digital trade provisions in the world’.

With that as the underpinning philosophy is not surprising that it poses a number of fundamental problems for the left. State ownership and public services were a matter of some controversy on the left in terms of what was or was not permissible under EU rules. As the explaining summary puts it, this agreement: ‘commits both parties to additional disciplines on their state-owned enterprises, designated monopolies and enterprises granted special rights or privileges …’. The detail of what this means can be found in chapter 4 of the full agreement. It is apparent that state-owned enterprises will be allowed if the behave like private enterprises and are not allowed any kind of monopoly. And so, to that other area of controversy, state aid. While Britain has escaped the European Court of Justice jurisdiction, the agreement continues to ensure that state intervention is heavily policed. This may still give greater scope for state subsidy but given that Johnson’s preferred mode of ‘levelling up’ is privately delivered infrastructure and new technology projects, the scope for any democratically controlled interventions by devolved government is severely constrained.

That is why the Internal Markets Act is so important for the Johnson project – it takes back powers devolved to Scotland (and Wales) to provide financial aid to industry. Admittedly the Scottish Government rarely used them, largely because of EU state aid regulations but with Covid and dominance of economic short-termism, the need for a planned, local, democratically controlled intervention is overwhelming. This agreement makes that less likely.

There is a belief by many, even on the left, that the EU, largely because of the limited reforms offered in the Social Chapter, offers a strong guarantee of workers’ rights. In fact, the EU offered no protection at all in key areas of class conflict like pay, the right of association and the right to strike. That protection, however limited it may be, is nevertheless important at a time when the unions have very little reach into significant areas of the economy, especially in sections of the private sector where precarious contracts prevail. Whether that protection will survive this deal is open to question: ‘The Agreement includes reciprocal commitments not to reduce the level of protection for workers or fail to enforce employment rights … both Parties have the freedom and ability to make their own decisions on how they regulate - meaning that retained EU law will not have a special place on the UK’s statute books.’ This does not mean no regression. Rather, it means, as the government has pointed out, no dilution of standards ‘in a manner that has an effect on trade or investment’.

Despite the nature of the deal, criticism based on its neo-liberal nature has been somewhat muted. The Scottish Labour Party opposed it in the Scottish Parliament on the basis that it was ‘half baked’ and lacked proper scrutiny. A letter, organised by Another Europe is Possible, which helped provoke a rebellion by 34 Labour MPs in Westminster, who abstained rather than support the deal, was better, arguing that the deal ‘is designed to open the door to rampant economic deregulation – a loss of rights and protections for workers …’. Perhaps the letter could have gotten more support if had explicitly respected the vote to leave and called for the kind of deal advocated by Jeremy Corbyn in his Coventry speech of 2018, where he argued for a ‘bespoke’ deal with the EU, based on a customs union that required opt-outs from the neo-liberal framework. Corbyn’s position was undermined by the ‘second vote’ brigade led by none other current leader, Keir Starmer, hastening Labour’s and Corbyn’s defeat and his rise.

The SNP’s opposition could hardly be based on a challenge the neo-liberalism embedded in the deal because it is supported by the EU which the SNP wants to join just as soon as it wins independence. As former ASLEF president, Tosh McDonald, argued at a Labour Grassroots event, whatever we think of the deal, the working class now has only its own governments to deal with, governments no longer camouflaged by EU rules and regulations and structures. It will require a united and determined working class response to defeat neo-liberalism, but the Covid crisis has exposed the depth of inequality right across Britain. This is an opportunity the left must grasp.

Vince Mills is co-secretary of Radical Options for Scotland and Europe (ROSE) – https://www.radicaloptions.scot/
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ut until the crisis of 2008. His cabinet and prospered—for the capitalist class—economic order that began in the 1980s Obama presidency and the neoliberal interests abroad. Biden’s principal goal capitalist system and to U.S. imperial the military. He is committed to the industrial corporations, the media and establishment with its ties to finance, president, the Democratic Party in the Senate and as Obama’s vice- Biden embodies, in his long history advancing his legislative agenda. While Biden will face great difficulty in if the Democrats lose one of those, elections in the state of Georgia, and, be decided on January 5 by two runoff house. The control of the Senate will weakening their majority in the lower seats in the House of Representatives, election, the Democrats lost nine While Biden won the presidential election, the Democrats lost nine seats in the House of Representatives, weakening their majority in the lower house. The control of the Senate will be decided on January 5 by two runoff elections in the state of Georgia, and, if the Democrats lose one of those, Biden will face great difficulty in advancing his legislative agenda. While Biden won the presidential election, the Democrats lost nine seats in the House of Representatives, weakening their majority in the lower house. The control of the Senate will be decided on January 5 by two runoff elections in the state of Georgia, and, if the Democrats lose one of those, Biden will face great difficulty in advancing his legislative agenda. Biden embodies, in his long history in the Senate and as Obama’s vice-president, the Democratic Party establishment with its ties to finance, industrial corporations, the media and the military. He is committed to the capitalist system and to U.S. imperial interests abroad. Biden’s principal goal will be to re-establish the policies of the Obama presidency and the neoliberal economic order that began in the 1980s and prospered—for the capitalist class—until the crisis of 2008. His cabinet appointments, about half of them from the Obama administration, and his plans to re-establish international ties—the Paris Climate Agreement, the Iran Nuclear deal, the World Health Organization, the UN Human Rights Council—and strengthen existing alliances like NATO, make his objectives clear. As he said, ‘We are back and ready to lead.’ Biden must deal with problems like Iran and North Korea, but his great foreign policy challenge will be China, which has become an economic competitor with the United States, while Russia will continue to be a disrupter of the US-dominated world order that Biden desires. While the self-proclaimed ‘democratic socialist’ Bernie Sanders lost his bid for the Democratic Party nomination, American progressives and socialists did not do badly in the election, though they still remain a minor force in U.S. politics. Still the progressives, many of whom are members of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), retained their positions in the House of Representatives and gained others in state senate and house elections, as well as in city councils. All four members of ‘the squad’ of progressives—Ihan Omar of Minnesota, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of New York, Rashida Tlaib of Michigan and Ayanna Pressley of Massachusetts—won re-election. DSA now has five members in the US House (out of 435), as well as seven members in state senate seats and 30 in state lower houses. In Chicago, DSA has six of 50 city council members. But Biden’s Democratic majority claims that the Left’s talk of ‘socialism’ and ‘defunding the police’ caused the party’s losses in the House. While Biden may wish to go back to the past, the depth of the American crisis of coronavirus, economic depression might force him to take more progressive positions than he has in the past—but don’t count on it. While the Biden administration promises to be more sympathetic to working class issues of the unions, immigrants, communities of colour, and women, neither Biden nor the Democrats have done much for these groups in fort years. All of them will have to organize and fight if they are to make progress under Biden, and in many states they will continue to face Republican governments and the forces of Trumpism. Unions—representing only 10 percent of American worker—remain weak and strikes had virtually disappeared in the last forty years, though in the last two years there has been increasing number of them. Women teachers and nurses have represented the majority in recent strikes and protests. And last spring and summer some 20m people or all racial groups joined protests against police racism and violence. So, the potential for a fight is there. DSA will be campaigning for Medicare for all and working to reach 100,000 members. 

Dan La Botz is a Brooklyn-based writer and a member of both Solidarity and the Democratic Socialists of America. His latest book, and first novel, is ‘Trotsky in Tijuana’ (trotskyintijuana.com).

Cartoon by Bob Starrett. Use with appreciation and acknowledgement.
Maggie Chetty recalls the life of Skinnider and the work to keep her memory alive.

From the great political ferment of the first two decades of the twentieth century emerged a raft of revolutionaries across Europe. Within that ferment were the seeds of revolution in Scotland, Ireland, Russia, Germany and a catastrophic World War. The campaign for female suffrage in Britain saw the development of a core of brave women who came into struggle and were split, like the international progressive movement, by war. Those like Sylvia Pankhurst and Helen Crawforth were against the war while Constance Markievicz, Margaret Skinnider and fellow Scot, James Connolly, saw the opportunity for Ireland’s long-awaited bid for revolution.

Born in 1892, Skinnider was a Glasgow schoolteacher of Irish heritage from Coatbridge who became an expert sniper and was deeply involved with the Cumann na mBan organisation for Irish women volunteers. She was called to Dublin at Christmas time 1915 by Markievicz who had heard of her exploits with the Anne Devlin Branch, and later returned in April 1916 to join the Easter Rising. Skinnider operated as a courier moving from the Royal College of Surgeons to the General Post Office with bullets from the English soldiers bouncing off the wooden frames of her bicycle wheels. She would come back, change into her volunteer uniform and go up to the rafters of the Royal College to be a sniper claiming to her commandant, Michael Mallin, that she had every right to fight as a soldier, quoting the Proclamation of the Provisional Government.

In a raid to attack English snipers, she was badly injured on her right side with four bullets in her side and back, the only woman to have been injured with four bullets in her side and back, was badly injured on her right side in a raid to attack English snipers, she was badly injured on her right side with four bullets in her side and back, the only woman to have been injured in the Rising. On recovering, she went to the USA on fund-raising tours for the families of imprisoned volunteers with her friend, Nora Connolly, James’s eldest daughter. While there, she wrote a promotional book, Doing My Bit For Ireland.

In the Civil War, she carried out training for the Cumann na mBan women and became Quartermaster General of the Irish Republican Army. She was one of many Republican women who were against the Treaty. In 1928 she was finally accepted back into teaching in Dublin. She fought for women’s rights all her life. She became President of the Irish National Teachers’ Organisation and served on the executive of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions after she retired. When she died in 1971, she was given a full military funeral and was buried beside her friend and comrade Markievicz.

During 2016 along with Jim Lister and Stephen Wright of Fair Pley and writer, Cat Hepburn, we produced a three act play about Margaret’s life called Margaret Skinnider - Rebel Heart. The play was performed as a rehearsed reading around Glasgow and west of Scotland and headed the May Day celebrations at the Oran Mor, Glasgow with a sellout audience.

While we were grateful for the financial support of UNISON, Calton Books, Irish Government, Irish National Teachers’ Organisation and the support of a number of Irish cultural organisations, we were unable to raise enough funding to develop the piece into a full production. There was great interest in the play and many questions about why many young women of Scottish-Irish origin had grown up in Scotland without any knowledge of this amazing woman. I met an Irishwoman at a playreading at the Centre for Contemporary Arts, Glasgow on Easter Sunday 2016 - someone who had been taught by Skinnider.

The progressive movement in Scotland has had a rather uneasy relationship with Scottish-Irish politics and, prior to the Good Friday Agreement, there has been a process of self-censorship that has kept the discussion rather narrow. Brexit has changed the debate somewhat. It is also true that the number of young Irish people who have come to study or make their lives in Scotland has helped to bring about more of a sense of shared Celtic culture and a history that goes back to early medieval times.

The 1916 Rising Centenary Committee-Scotland have carried on promoting Irish history and culture since 2016. We launched a book called We Will Rise Again-Ireland, Scotland and the Easter Rising (2018); held an event to commemorate the setting up of the first Dail; organized an evening with Irish cultural organization, Conradh na Gaeilge, on Margaret Skinnider and a joint event with Glasgow Women’s Library to celebrate the life of Skinnider.

We are developing the play into a one woman play which we hope to take to the Edinburgh Fringe in 2021 and to other community venues including the St Patrick’s Festival. This is being developed with funding from UNISON and the Irish Government. So, we would be very pleased to receive further donations to this project, no matter how small. Skinnider was a formidable political activist, and trade unionist whose memory deserves to be celebrated among young activists today. Send donations to 1916 Rising Centenary Committee-Scotland; Account number 20364072/Bank sort code 608301.

Maggie Chetty is the chair of the 1916 Rising Centenary Committee-Scotland
The 2018 Times & Sunday Times Good University Guide, listing the worst performing universities for equality and social diversity, put St Andrews (StA) at 131 out of 132 universities, with Oxford and Cambridge competing for the bottom place. Writing a report on equality and diversity for David Cameron, David Lammy MP described these universities as ‘gated communities’ for the rich and powerful.

I’d come across a family whose daughter was about to go to StA. They’d previously bought a flat for their older daughter for £500k and wanted another flat for their youngest. They paid over £420k knowing that coming graduation both flats would go for a 20% mark-up. It was like pocket-money to them. Everyone knows about the high property prices in StA, particularly the pressures caused by an increasing student population. One in three privately rented properties go to students, so much so that Fife Council has had to impose a local moratorium on student lets.

‘Town and Gown’ is an ancient dialectic that runs through StA. For locals there’s a perception of free-spending students, crowded coffee shops, pubs and eateries, beach parties, the May Day Dip, November Raison Week, the April Kate Kennedy annual pageant procession, the various summer and winter balls, and the ‘Kate meets Wills’ guff. StA traditionally had three colleges: St Salvator, St Mary and St Leonards but the student population has long out-grown the old collegiate system. It sprawls across town in various sites along North and South Streets, The Scores along the cliffs, to modern science blocks, sports facilities, library, Student Association with residences scattered all about.

There’s no doubting the hand of history. A hierarchy of gowns (and how they are worn) denote the different rank of students. First year students called, Bejants and Bejantines have an ‘academic family’ known as mums and dads. Some may this find it quaint but over time I have come to see it as a kind of class distinction. Well over half the non-student population

serves the university – a small army of porters, cleaners, ancillary workers, maintenance staff, groundsmen, caterers, administrators. Another army represents the 2,000 or so academics travelling into StA from all parts of Fife. StA has a resident population of around 10,000 whose travel to work population doubles during term time. Add to that the world’s golfing fans and thousands of tourists and the East Neuk bulges under demographic pressures.

2019-20 saw 7,442 undergraduates and 1,782 postgraduates. Soon this is expected to increase to over 10,000 and 3,000 and so the university is desperate for new residences. Interestingly StA stated that 20% of the accommodation would be ‘affordable’, so what does that make the other 80%? Meanwhile a new campus is being developed at the old papermill at Guardbridge. ‘We need to remain competitive in the global market,’ says the University Principal, a mantra repeated again and again. St Andrews as a town is expanding – the newly built Madras School represents a major urban development stretching from the A9 to the Rufflets Hotel (which is currently farmland).

All this on the tiny footprint of modern day StA, encircled by green belt, golf courses and a hot-spot for all year round tourism. StA may be the economic power house of the East Neuk but it comes at a price – a stream of constant development with cranes and scaffolding dotting the skyline.

There are twelve applicants for every place at StA. Minimum grades are AAA or AAAAB for (higher) years. The university boasts one of the highest satisfaction ratings in the country at 95%. Female students outnumber males 3:2 and have one of the highest ratios of international students (12% from the EU and 34% from the rest of the world, a high proportion from the USA). So why the focus on diversity and social equality?

I looked up the university’s latest report: ‘Equality Mainstreaming Report’ (April 2019) naively expecting the student demographic to be laid out. The report covered nine areas: Age, Disability, Gender Re-assignment, Marriage and Civil Partnership, Pregnancy and Maternity, Race, Religion & Belief, Sex/ Gender, and Sexual Orientation. The report was professionally presented but said nothing about the socio-economic backgrounds of the students, their schools, income ranges, or even where they came from. The bulk of the report was about staff (27 pages) on things like gender and pay gaps. But there were only 8 pages on the actual students and nothing on socio-economic indicators.

I then looked at the ‘Student Equality and Diversity Report’ (2019). More graphs featuring analysis on Disability, Ethnicity and Gender, each focusing on population numbers, attainment levels and retention rates (with various recommended ‘actions’). But again, nothing on socio-economic factors, the class backgrounds, the schools and countries of origin.

Diversity and equality were simply grafted onto the existing student body resulting in two incredibly boring reports. But if the student population is ‘weighted’ in favour of richer students over poorer students on selection and intake, then no amount of monitoring is suddenly going to make the situation diverse or equitable if the base inequality is structural and largely determined in advance.

Wikipedia told me that 40% of StA student intake came from ‘Independent Schools’, that is selective and fee-paying ones and that 58% of students were ‘financially independent’, with only 13% deemed from ‘lower income backgrounds’. Once again female undergraduates outnumbered males by 60% to 40%. The Guardian University Guide 2020 quoted sources from the 2017-18 Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA). Again, the gender ratio (58%/42%) and again the school backgrounds – 60% from state schools and 40% from non-state schools. Yet only 7% of the UK school population are privately educated. Their age ranges showed that most students (86%) were aged 18-25, with 6.74% 30+. HESA indicated where the students came from: UK - 54.33%, EU - 11.78% and Non-EU - 33.89%. But look at the difference in annual Fees (2019-20)
When will there be a harvest for the world?

From her kitchen and computer, Annie Morgan thinks through the implications of mining and money for food and fairness

As I cooked a bit tottie and chard from our community garden, I reflected on the refrain ‘Feed the World’. We recall our consciences being pricked some 35 years ago by Bob Geldof and an awareness of what is happening globally is vital. For this, I like the internet (with obvious caveats on misuse and misinformation). The library of information, interconnection and hope generates from the awareness of movements like Via Campesina, Rajavo Solidarity Campaign but not Palestinian Solidarity Campaign but not any political party and a “Yes” voter.

But back to Bob - the idea that the rich world (even with its own plenty of poverty) can fix the poor world is very problematic and colonial in conceptualisation and philanthropic capitalism perpetuates the system that can only be fixed with equity and international co-operation. Bob’s efforts went badly wrong. He ignored Medicine Sans Frontier’s request to wait until an infrastructure for delivery of aid was in place. Both the CIA backed rebels and Mengistu Haile Mariam’s authoritarian distortion of socialism (via forced collectivism) sucked up the donations and a disaster ensued that worsened poverty in Ethiopia.

The practices of the International Monetary Fund’s Structural Adjustment Programmes (now renamed Poverty Reduction and Extended Credit Facilities) has resulted - as with Ethiopia post-Band Aid, in poorer communities in poor countries forced into competition with other indebted countries. Here, environmental destruction follows with cash crops and mono-cropping.

I mention this to warn against philanthropic capitalism and NGO solutions without looking at global justice because to some helping the less fortunate is good business because there is money to be made in hunger. This is miles away from the solidarity demonstrated by the East Kilbride Rolls Royce workers concern for Chilean workers on the other side of the world - see the Nae Pasaran film.

Another call for solidarity comes from Chilean mining communities. A delegation visited Glasgow before the virus hit and described the horrors of extraction. In this we should recall the Brazilian tragedies of the Mariana (2015) and Brumadinho (2019) dam busts with hundreds of casualties.
occurred because of the methods of mining use by the multinationals. At the same time, there is a massive challenge in a just transition from fossil to not worsen the conditions for mining communities wherever they are.

As I focus on food sovereignty, I was unaware of the extent of the impact of mining on food production. The list of harmful consequences is long: erosion, soil degradation, water depletion, loss of biodiversity, impact on bees and other pollinators, damming rivers and ponds, waste disposal, acid drainage, chemicals including cyanide, contamination of ground and surface water, and water waste. Add to this the impact on miners’ health, dislocation from family and community, resettlement, child and women’s labour often to the detriment of subsistence farming, and all points to the stressors on food production, supplies and harmful elements in the food chain.

To avoid only endlessly naming the problem and so to offer hope, we should reach out to resistance and renewal movements mentioned above. We should be able to do so as Scotland has a proud history in the Scottish Land Restoration League even if we should also note that it is lamentable that Benny Higgins of the feudal Buccleuch Estates is chair of the Scottish Government’s economic advisory group.

Global capitalism with its focus on destructive growth, competition rather than cooperation and profit centred economic development has its agents supporting mining. Erdogan in Turkey is but one example. Despite the terrible disaster in Soma, where 301 miners were killed by an explosion, the tragedy could have been prevented. In 2014, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) pushed through laws designed to help the mining corporations. At the time, Erdogan is reported to have said ‘Deaths are part of the job’.

In another part of Turkey, Canadian mining company, Alamos Gold, started mining operations at Mount Ada in the Kaz Daglari region. The mountain is of great cultural significance and the landscape incredibly beautiful - the black honey is famous and there are 32 endemic plant species. The protectors-protestors know the consequences of harming the pollinators. Vital in the food chain. The mining company failed to obtain a renewal of mining concession following the widespread environmental protests. They seek renewal and continue with a new mining field elsewhere in Turkey at Afyon-Emirdag.

John Belamy Foster is right to point out that there is a metabolic rift and we have to restore our relationship with nature. Rabbie Burns in ‘Ode to Moose’ knew this: respect the bees and the small things.

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

Not cooking with (British) Gas

Derek McPherson tells a tale of corporate greed against the hoi polloi.

British Gas (BG) is bound to comply with Schedule 5 of the Gas Act 1995, which constitutes an agreement between it and the then Secretary of State for Trade and Industry. This agreement commits BG to treat ‘propane estate’ customers, that is, gas customers who rely on a local ‘off-grid’ network, on the same contractual terms as network gas customers. In the case of its ‘piped propane estate’ of Stornoway on the Isle of Lewis, that requirement came with the benefit of having the transportation and subsequent maintenance costs of the gas required to service that town, provided by government. This arrangement, funded by the Office of Gas and Electricity Markets (Ofgem), currently saves BG c£800,000pa. This, thus, ensures its profits from the town sitting atop this nation’s fuel-poverty table, are returned without the necessity of investment.

The most important part of the Schedule 5 agreement to BG’s Stornoway customers is they are entitled to the same BG tariffs as their mainland counterparts. In 2017, however, Angus MacNeil MP, upon discovering a constituent had been repeatedly refused, in writing, access to BG’s cheapest tariff, released a press statement asserting BG was ‘Massively overcharging’ his constituents ‘by between £600,000 and £1million per year’. BBC Scotland and STV also aired the story provoking more than forty Stornoway gas customers to complain that they too had been refused access to BG’s cheapest tariff. One of them took legal action against BG whilst another wrote asking why he couldn’t get a cheaper tariff, or change his supplier for that matter.

In response, Kathy White, a BG executive officer, advised him thus: ‘While Stornoway is theoretically open to competition, the high cost of supplying gas means that in practice, other suppliers choose not to supply.’ This was, of course, demonstrably untrue; because whatever the reason ‘other suppliers choose not to supply’, it is not the ‘high cost’ of transportation which, as we have noted, is met by Ofgem. Nor was this the first time BG had made this spurious claim. As far back as 2013, a BG Complaints Team Manager wrote to a different Stornoway customer informing him thus: ‘... if the market were opened up in Stornoway ... would other energy companies be forthcoming in supplying the area in which you live at a loss?’

When the customer who had taken legal action against BG, became aware of Ms White’s letter he had her cited as a witness in order that she could explain, under oath, why BG had proffered demonstrably false information to a Stornoway customer. Enter BG’s representative law firm: Womble Bond Dickinson (UK) LLP (WBD). Yes, the same WBD which attempted to defend The Post Office (PO) against a mass action by Postmasters and mistresses who claimed, successfully, that they had been falsely accused of theft by the PO during what is now known as the ‘Horizon IT scandal’. In that case, WBD gained notoriety when it attempted to scuttle the case by have the overseeing judge, Mr Justice Peter Fraser recused by the simple expedient of accusing him of ‘bias’. That attempt to disparage the impartiality of a Judge was dismissed in a ‘scathing 17 page judgement’, by Lord Justice Coulson and the PO shortly thereafter threw in the towel. Along with £58m in compensation.

Even so, it was still shocking when, in response to a ‘Witness Citation Notice’ being served on Ms K White, WBD wrote to the court requesting she be
excused from having to testify because she was: ‘a junior customer services manager.’ This action was referred to the Scottish Legal Complaints Commission (SLCC) with the allegation that WBD had sought to mislead the court by equating executive officer with a more junior post. The SLCC found the WBD solicitor had not attempted to mislead The Court because: i) The Practitioner does not capitalise ‘junior customer services manager’; ii) ‘The letter does not otherwise suggest that this is her official job title.’; and iii) The description, ‘would not, on a subjective reading, be considered to be false and misleading’. So, the SLCC report absolves the WBD solicitor because: he proffered the information in lower case, he stated it only once, and if the Sheriff who read it had done so ‘subjectively’, he wouldn’t have noticed.

For the record, BG won that case and despite Richard Burnell a BG Investigations Manager conceding, under oath, that the information in Ms White’s letter was ‘inaccurate’, Sheriff Christopher Dixon, who had taken the case from Sheriff Fleetwood, specifically commended Ms White’s ‘reliability’ as a witness.

But the fight goes on. Battles are being won. In 2020, WBD raised an action in The Court of Session in an attempt to have a blog which catalogues the entire Stornoway gas battle, removed from the internet. As the Court of Session denied this. Undeterred, it tried again. That attempt culminated with a headline in the Daily Mail on 17 June 2020: ‘British Gas fails in fresh bid to silence islands blogger’. The blog which The Honourable Lady Poole deemed perfectly legal can be accessed at: https://britishgaslawlessness.blogspot.com/2020/07/episode-8-open-letterto-our-mp-angus.html?m=1

After graduating from Strathclyde in 1993, Derek McPherson spent a year in Portugal researching the novelist, Jose Maria de Eca de Queiroz. Then he taught English in university, prison and secondary school. In 2006, open a guest house. At the moment, his BG battle is conducted on a full-time basis.

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**Yes, Yes, Yes: UCS – Unity Creates Strength**

On the occasion of the beginning of the 50th anniversary in 2021 of the UCS work-in, we reprint a book review by Gordon Morgan from Scottish Left Review (no 67, Nov/Dec 2011).


Oor faithers fought this fight before/ Maclean, McShane fought fairly/ And we Oor faithers fought this fight before/


Oor faithers fought this fight before/ Maclean, McShane fought fairly/ And we Oor faithers fought this fight before/

The Hell wi’ Ridley, Heath and Davies/ The Hell wi’ Ridley, Heath and Davies/ They say it is too late save us/ But we’ll show them they’re not on. (chorus of UCS)

David Betteridge introduces the poems and poets including Freddy Anderson, Bill Sutherland, Jim Aitkin, Edwin Morgan, Tessa Ransford amongst many others.

Their emblem was the banner red/ they were no craven crew/ like Clyde has served you with its streams/ they lived and fought for you/ Their tribe still live throughout the years/ nor change with Time nor Tide! For Liberty come sing with me/ this ballad of the Clyde. (last verse from ‘Ballad of the Clyde’ by Freddie Anderson)

Some poems were specially commissioned for the book such as I saw shipbuilding dying/ Till men began to fight/ To stop the closing of the yards/ Showing solidarity is might/ People came together/ With their passion and their pride/ I felt at one with them/ And proud to be the Clyde. (verse from ‘I See the Salmon Flow’ by Peter Scrimgeour)

The book is illustrated with photos and cartoons from the time. Further reading is courtesy of John Foster. Finally, Smokestack Books only publishes radical song and poetry and can be visited at www.smokestack-books.co.uk where the book can be purchased.

Jimmy Reid and Airlie/ Barr, Gilmour, and the rest/ They aa went doon tae London Toon/ The government tae face/ They telt them we were workin in/ That we were gaun tae stay/ When the government relented/ UCS had won the day. (verse from ‘Doon through the Years’ by Arthur Johnstone)
Detroit (2017), director, Kathryn Bigelow and screenwriter, Mark Boal
Reviewed by Jackie Bergson.

The first female to win an Oscar for best director with The Hurt Locker (2010), Kathryn Bigelow, has made a powerful mark on the moviemaking map. Tense, heroic tones underpinned that six-Oscar-winning thriller about American IED (improvised explosive device) detection crews working in Afghanistan. She then directed Zero Dark Thirty (2012), a fictional drama about the killing of Osama Bin Laden, with deeply contentious themes of ‘legitimised’ government interrogation techniques.

A bold filmmaker whose themes and sub-texts parallel stories which arise from extreme political and cultural circumstances, with Detroit (2017) Bigelow again takes her audience on a deep dive into an experience which is menacing and explosive. Framed by a sense of claustrophobic intensity within a community seething with violent conflict, with characteristic fly-on-the-wall and in-the-moment style, this film leaves little or no room for ambiguity. Responsible telling the story about talented black men who were murdered by police in Detroit in 1967, it honestly reflects events which represent, to its director, ‘a real American tragedy’. Bigelow’s consistent collaborator is screenwriter, Mark Boal, who she credits with passion for detail. Boal wrote about his approach to the screenplay for Detroit: ‘The foundation of the story ... was provided by an ample historical record, documents, police files, and a research team I commissioned, led by veteran investigative journalist David Zeman ... The summer of 1967 witnessed two of the worst civil disturbances in American history ... [where the] more widely remembered (and celebrated) spectacle of rebellion from that same moment in time is of the summer of love ... by now ... diffused into little more than an advertising trope, but the events in Detroit are hard evidence of a cultural crisis that remains unresolved, of two Americas that still don’t know quite how to deal with each other’.

As the film opens, paintings by artist, Jacob Lawrence, in particular from his collection, The Migration Series, are captioned to briefly project a past timeline of black migration. These artistic impressions pre-narrate where we are at this point in America’s history of racial conflict. We then move quickly into the harrowing realism of a combustive powder-keg of riots within Detroit’s oppressed and restless communities, as their black political leader, Democratic Congressman, John Conyers (Laz Alonso) calls for peaceful demonstration. With that, the film immediately exudes the feeling of being there.

Implicit in Detroit is the representation of a white supremacist argument which endorses the use of violence, oppression and disenfranchisment to careless and abusively label black Americans as ‘criminals’. Less implicit is the credence which was afforded to violent racist police and blatant disregard of judicial equality (through advancements in legal civil rights). Identical themes are being brought to light by other exceptional filmmakers such as the British director of 12 Years a Slave (2013) Steve McQueen, whose recent collection of Small Axe films screened on British television.

Verisimilitude and close paralleling with factualism are particular trademarks of Bigelow-Boal collaborations. Their decision to create a film which leaves little or no room for ambiguity about versions of truth in their latest collaboration was purely intentional. Outstanding performances are given by British actors, Will Poulter and John Boyega, who continue to gain huge admiration from audiences and critics both in the UK and across the pond. They lead a strong cast. Despite the excellence of these performances, some reviewers levelled criticisms of role stereotyping and simplification against the actors playing police officers. Rather, the character of police officer, Philip Krauss, brilliantly played by Poulter, is conveyed with aplomb as a force for evil, rather than law and order as reasonable people see it. Interviewed about his role whilst these criticisms raged amongst some, Poulter made his feeling of responsibility in playing the character of Krauss clear: ‘... to expose a racist individual in the context of a film that has so much potential for impacting social change and the fact that the film makes such a relevant comment about society’. The point about such racists is that their vile conduct defines stereotype and vice-versa.

Detroit as a ‘racial horror-crime’ film turns out to have been strangely predictive of the broiling tensions which resurfaces and brought amplified anger, racism and division to bear across the planet in 2020. Whilst we witness such disturbing phenomena through fresh eyes and broadcasting technologies, we come to reason that this excellent film is as much about the long-term impacts which racist violence makes upon its victims as it is about conveying the truth of the events which happened to inspire it.

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Ben Jackson,
Reviewed by Colin Fox.

The intellectual case for Scottish Independence and how it evolved over the past 50 years is the subject of this new book from Cambridge University Press. It claims somewhat astoundingly that ‘The pages of *New Left Review* might seem an unlikely location for the intellectual origins of modern Scottish nationalism, yet this journal of rigorous Marxist analysis has a good claim to such a title. In the 1960s writings of Perry Anderson and Tom Nairn, lie some of the foundational assumptions of later Scottish nationalist rhetoric’.

‘It is striking’ says author Ben Jackson, Associate Professor of Modern History at University College Oxford, ‘how the work of a few independence supporting intellectuals has recast the terms of Scottish political debate since the 1960s’. Among the intellectuals Jackson cites are Neil McCormick, Tom Nairn, Neal Ascherson, Christopher Harvie and Stephen Maxwell. Nairn in particular is seen as pivotal. His journey from Marxism to populist nationalism centres much of this study. More than 20 pages are devoted to his journey from Gramsci to the SNP, beginning with his critique of the innate conservatism of ‘Labourism’ in Britain and highlighted initially by his *New Left Review* comrade, Ralph Milliband. Nairn took up Milliband’s theme insisting Labour was no threat to the British state nor would it ever herald the changes necessary to arrest the decline of British capitalism. That could only happen, Nairn insisted, in the ‘Scottish Question’, ‘through a political break: a disruption at the level of the UK state – allowing the emergence of sharper antagonisms and a will to reform the old order root and branch’.

Nairn was also unimpressed in 1968 with the prevailing attitudes of Scottish nationalism: ‘This evil melange of decrepit Presbyterians and imperialist thuggery, whose spirit appears to be solidly represented in the SNP ... This rough-hewn sadism will surely be present in whatever junta of corporal-punishers and Kirk-going cheese-parers Mrs Ewing might preside over in Edinburgh’. He dismissed the SNP as bland bourgeois nationalists similar to those found elsewhere around the globe: ‘After all when the going was good for imperialism, the world heard very little indeed for the Scots’ longing for independence.’

Yet by the early 1970s, Nairn’s opposition had ‘pared’. He said his ‘support for Scottish independence was on balance worthwhile since it would be a powerful blow against the British state. But it would only be through the creation of a better, socialist Scottish nationalism that the true emancipation could be achieved’. Scottish nationalism he further argued ‘necessarily combined progressive and regressive elements and it could not be assumed a priori that in an independent Scotland the Left would become a hegemonic force.’

By the late 1970s, Nairn’s nationalism had begun to eclipse his socialism. ‘With his perceptible loss of faith in socialism and the working class he put Marx to one side in favour of bourgeois republicanism’, claims Jackson. Meanwhile Ray Burnett in his timeless 1974 essay, ‘Socialists and the SNP’, argued: ‘The basic strategic question is whether the politics of Scottish nationalism represented a distraction from socialist objectives or on the contrary the means by which socialism might be advanced in these isles’. These deepening political divisions on the question manifested themselves in ‘The 79 Group’ split. Under the influence of Alex Salmond, Margo Macdonald, Maxwell, Ascherson and Nairn they sought to position the SNP overtly on the left. But Salmond ‘by some distance the most important politician to advance Independence in modern Scottish history’ insists Jackson, soon abandoned his support for social democracy and moved right advocating low taxes for corporations and lauding the ‘Celtic Tiger’ model employed in Eire. ‘Scotland must seek a competitive edge for its economic model’ he said ‘by reducing business taxes to entice international investment’, echoing both Thatcher and Blair.

As Jackson points out the SNP has gone further in recent years in advocating this case for ‘international competitiveness’. Mike Russell and Andrew Wilson, the high priests of the SNP centre right, took their cue to argue for ‘economic freedom’ for business ‘to reduce the size of government in our country’. According to Mike Russell in *Grasping the Thistle* (2006): ‘The UK was depressing private sector enterprise and growth in Scotland both argued attesting: ‘We are no longer fans of a wider application of the principle of universality’.

The modern SNP now employs populist rhetoric underpinned by such centre right economics, argues Jackson, pointing out that the late, Stephen Maxwell, saw the writing on the wall in 2000: ‘Over the last decade’ Maxwell wrote ‘as the SNP’s heart has become more attached to social democracy, its economic head has inclined to neo-liberalism’. For Jackson, managing the tensions between neo-liberal economics and social democracy is the central challenge facing Nicola Sturgeon today in finding ‘an artful combination for the purposes of building a diverse coalition of political support for the SNP.’

As for the case for Left-wing nationalism advocated by Nairn in 1970, Maxwell concluded 40 years later the SNP ‘no longer argue that a more radical socialist option was the likely outcome of a new Scottish state because the support of business and Scotland’s middle class would inhibit the eradication of poverty and inequality’.

Nowadays, ‘Independence is about delivering social justice with enterprise as two sides of the same coin’ claims Nicola Sturgeon. But such political sophistry means, when all is said and done, the SNP’s loyalties ultimately lie with those who retain economic and political power over the Scottish people – in other words the very class Tom Nairn and others set out to depose back in 1968!

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Victor Serge,  
**Notebooks: 1936-1947, New York**  
Review Books, 2019, £14, pp651, 9781681372709  
Reviewed by Sean Sheehan.

No one writing from personal experience has expressed more political joy for the achievement of the 1917 Russian Revolution and elegiac regret for its aftermath than Victor Serge. Born in Belgium to impoverished Russian exiles, it was in Paris that his radicalism took root in anarchism. It resulted in four years in prison and on release in 1917 over a year was spent reaching Russia to support the revolution on the ground. He became a Bolshevik - the only one to attend Kropotkin’s funeral in 1921 – but his libertarian instincts and open mind doomed him to trouble after Lenin’s untimely death and the increasing tyranny of Stalin (‘frightening and banal, like a Caucasian dagger’).

Expelled from the Party in 1928, Serge was arrested and then rearrested in 1933. Sentenced to internal exile, he was extremely fortunate in being allowed to leave Russia with his family after three years. He was again living in France when the Nazis invaded but managed to flee to Marseilles; exile in Mexico followed and he died there in 1947.

Serge’s graphic account of an eventful and often heartbreaking life before securing a place on the last boat out of Marseilles fills the pages of his *Memoirs of a Revolutionary* (published in 1951). The book is so good that quoting from it is irresistible, as in his recall of finally crossing the Soviet border in the dead of night in early 1919: ‘Choked with joy, we shouted ‘Greetings, comrade!’ to a Red sentry; he nodded, and then asked if we shouted ‘Greetings, comrade!’ to a Red sentry; he nodded, and then asked if we had any food. We had. Here, take it. The Revolution is hungry.’

In Russia, after his expulsion from the Party, he turned to writing novels: *Men in Prison* (1930), based on his incarceration in France, and the equally powerful *Birth of Our Power* (1931) that gives voice to the anarchist revolt in Spain and the urge to reach Petrograd after 1917. Completing his trilogy, *The Conquered City* (1932) is set in the civil war that followed the October revolution in Russia.

The compellingly readable *Notebooks*, mostly covering the six years in Mexico before his death at the age of 57, is eloquent testimony to his acumen as a writer. He describes the coastline of Morocco from the deck of the boat taking him to Mexico and responds to its beauty with metaphysical wonder: ‘The land is violet and blue in the morning mist. Around noon it’s illuminated, even though the sky is cloudy, and it gathers together a mass of pink, rust, ochre, dark green, light green tones, sombre touches of distant rocks, all of it full of life, almost carnal, sculpted by the waters. One can see that the earth is alive. It’s astonishing that men haven’t sufficiently realized this obvious fact and constructed a religion out of it.’

Serge’s powers of observation are brought to bear on the land and people of Mexico, inspiring in this reader a desire to see the country based around the places he visits and describes. He goes to the house where Trotsky was murdered by Stalin’s agents: ‘citadel of ghosts, haunted tomb, absolute distress. Around it, rich vegetation, blue mountains, the great, radiant sky.’ His shock at seeing again the woman who is now Trotsky’s widow (‘physically reduced to nothing’), is matched by his melancholy as he hears news about old comrades who have been executed in Russia or died in exile in poverty (as he would).

He cannot stop asking himself why the revolution failed, ‘the perversion of a revolutionary mentality that was extraordinarily elevated, luminous and powerful’, and he is pained by the fate of Trotsky, ‘the freest spirit, the least deformed by the narrowness of party life’. Serge is alert to charlatans who pose as non-conformists ‘by adopting little ready-made systems’ and admire themselves in ‘a cheap intellectual mirror’. Relying on his own power of thinking, he follows the course of the global war raging in Europe and Asia and tries to discern, through a glass darkly, its outcome and consequences.

Serge’s relative obscurity as an electric writer of non-fiction and novels is being redeemed by the gradual publication of his works by the New York Review of Books. This already includes his last novel, *Unforgiving Years*, a haunting and harrowing descent into the maelstrom of twentieth-century history, and – perhaps the finest of his fiction – *The Case of Comrade Tulayev*. It begins with the shooting of a high-ranking Soviet official on the streets of Moscow before charting the investigation into those responsible.

Despite a life of repeated disappointments and persecution, the flame of Serge’s communist faith never went out and reading him serves as a tonic for wavering souls. In March 1941, he wrote: ‘Temptation of the petty, submissive life with its guaranteed warmth – which we believe to be guaranteed but isn’t, or which evaporates. One drowns oneself in it. Forge ahead.’ If there were two monuments to Victor Serge, one should have those words emblazoned on it; the other one carved with these, from *Memoirs of a Revolutionary*: ‘the feeling of having so many dead men at my back, many of them my betters in energy, talent, and historical character, has often overwhelmed me, and that this feeling has been for me the source of a certain courage, if that is the right word for it.’

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Despite starting the year under lockdown, and despite the disaster that is Brexit and the uncertainty of quite how catastrophic it will prove to be, many are entering 2021 in the hope that it will be a better year for Scotland, the UK and the planet.

Most positively, on a global level, we will soon see Donald Trump leaving the White House, voluntarily or otherwise. Trump is, of course, still refusing to accept defeat. In fact, there is speculation that he may boycott Joe Biden’s inauguration. This would be only the second time in recent history that an ex-president has failed to witness the swearing-in of his successor, the previous time being the inauguration of Lyndon Johnson, when John F. Kennedy had a pretty watertight excuse for not turning up.

Over the last four years, many lazy commentators have compared Trump to Adolf Hitler. However, they did deal with defeat in much the same way. Hitler spent his last days hunkered in his underground shelter, refusing to accept that the Allies had won World War II. Trump, when not tweeting about being cheated in the election, has been hiding on the golf course. Both of their careers came to an end in a bunker.

Biden may not be the most inspiring or exciting politician on the planet, but he is a great example of someone refusing to give up on their dreams. He has been trying to reach The White House for thirty-six years. In UK terms, that is akin to Neil Kinnock finally becoming Prime Minister. Coincidentally, Biden allegedly lifted large chunks of a speech by Kinnock, when he first ran for president in 1984. I can only speculate as to how confused the voters must have been at the Connecticut primary, wondering why one of the candidates was making such a fuss about Militant infiltration of Liverpool City Council.

Of course, it’s not just Trump leaving the stage. Towards the end of 2020, we also saw the back of Dominic Cummings and The Yorkshire Ripper. It’s difficult to tell who was the more evil of those two. Only joking, of course, everyone knows it was Dominic Cummings.

Here in Scotland, we finally have a summer to look forward to, having eventually qualified for a major football tournament for the first time this century.

While the team had a fantastic unbeaten run in games behind closed doors, leaving us to think that the Tartan Army had been holding them back all these years, it would be a boost to have supporters in the stadiums and watching the games in fan zones across the country. Wearing a kilt and a ginger Jimmy wig, getting legless and dancing in fountains, singing ‘We’ll be Coming Down the Road’ or ‘Yes, Sir, I Can Boogie’ just won’t seem the same if we can only do it on Zoom.

That will, of course, be possible, if enough fans have had the Covid vaccine by June. That is, of course, the vaccine that we will be importing from Belgium, assuming all the millions of the phials of the much-trumpeted vaccine are not held up for weeks in lorry parks in Kent, or stuck in forty-mile traffic jams on the M20. That’s if they ever make it through the endless customs checks and paperwork that will exist on each side of the Channel if this blundering, feckless government continues its game of bluster with Brussels.

Hopefully, we can look forward to a better year once the treatment is rolled to everyone, although some are sceptical. Indeed, as it has mainly been administered so far to people over the age of ninety, it’s far too early for medics to establish whether incontinence, memory loss or death are side effects of the vaccine or not.

UK Health Secretary, Matt Hancock, has said that he too would be prepared to take his jab live on TV ‘if it were to save lives’. However, I’m reckoning this was a slip of the tongue, and that he meant to say he would do so ‘if it were to save my job’.

Maybe other ministers should also volunteer to do similar public-health related stunts. Like Michael Gove getting a prostate examination live on TV. Or, Jacob Rees-Mogg undergoing a much-needed vasectomy without anaesthetic live on TV. Or, Priti Patel having to shit on a stick to provide a stool sample, live on TV. That would be one way to put smiles on the public’s faces at the start of 2021. Happy New Year.

Vladimir McTavish hopes to be performing again somewhere, sometime, and in person before the end of 2021!
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

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