They’ve done it AGAIN!

A historical 4th consecutive term for SNP

(best re(a)d')

(But where does that REALLY leave the Left in Scotland?)
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 Calfe, president
Kevin Lindsay, ASLEF’s organiser in Scotland
Old wine in old bottles?

Though Charles Dickens did not say ‘It was not the best of times. It was not quite the worst of times’ as he began his novel, *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), this is what it feels like for the left after 6 May 2021 elections for the sixth Scottish Parliament. After months of electioneering as well as all the hopes and hype, the big picture is actually that things are pretty much as they were before. And, the polls in the immediate run up to 6 May, were not far off either predicting this eventual outcome. *Plus ça change plus c’est la même chose* - meaning ‘The more things change, the more they stay the same’ - does not adequately sum this up. Hence, a bit of ‘What the Dickens is going on?’ being needed.

But before we get on to that, it has to be acknowledged that the SNP streamlined the opposition despite tactical (pro-Unionist) voting, a strangely belcalmed political outcome due to the pandemic, and an increased turnout (up from 56% in 2016 to 63% in 2021). For a party that has been in office one way or another since 2007, that is no mean feat. To go one better on the ‘first-past-the-post’ constituency seats compared to 2016 is nothing short of miraculous. To have nearly won a majority of seats (65/129) in the parliament from the constituency seats alone (62 seats) is astounding. If the SNP had not been hamstrung by the D’Hondt method for calculating the list seats apportionment and, instead, had won the number of seats according to the size of the vote it received, that would have amounted to another 22 seats. The effect would equate to sum of 64+22 = supermajority. But that is precisely what the choice of the d’Hondt system was designed to prevent.

All that said, the SNP’s mandate to govern is actually not really any different from before. It had a clear mandate without or without the Greens from 5 May 2016. One seat does not make a huge difference. Even with the SNP governing as a minority party, this does not change that. This is to see the wood and not the trees.

What explains the SNP’s dominance? As ever, it’s a combination of what the SNP did and what the opposition did not do. The SNP was virtually untroubled by the opposition. Sturgeon was not wounded by Salmond and was strengthened by her enhanced profile during the pandemic as well as her overall handling of it. The SNP is pretty managerially competent as a governing party so was not a hostage to any banana skin slip ups – just compare Sturgeon to Boris Johnson. Some suggested that the SNP would have been in trouble without its independence totem for this would have caused voters to take more notice of its palpable weaknesses on education, health and transport.

Though it lost ground in seats (down two) and votes (down 1%), Scottish Labour under Anas Sarwar did not tank. Some will say this an achievement and endorsement of Sarwar and his politics. The argument runs that in less than three months, Sarwar steadied the sinking ship left to him by Leonard, giving Labour a good basis to recover before the next Scottish Parliament elections in 2026. But there are some obvious holes in this argument. First, it’s not clear that voters are widely aware of what Labour stands for, other than opposition to another independence referendum and independence itself. Like down south, its version of ‘Build back better’ is not clearly distinguishable from that of the governing party (see below). Merely stating again and again, the focus should be on tackling the effects of the pandemic more effectively and not independence does not cut much ice with those that think independence would allow the Scottish Government to do that exactly that – deal with the effects of the pandemic more effectively. Second, as the ‘new kid on the block’ of party leaders and from the centre (and not the left like Leonard), Sarwar was always likely to get a better press from the Scottish media. But that’s not to ignore that he is a more effective public performer than Leonard turned out to be. If Sarwar was shown to be incompetent, the media would have blasted him for it no matter being new and more ‘on message’.

The Greens are the only small success story for the left. They increased their number of MSPs by 25% (from 6 to 8) and their list vote share by 1.5%. They were the obvious party to vote for if the argument for a ‘supermajority’ held up to significant scrutiny. But it did not seem to do so, and they remain small fry (and even smaller after Alison Johnstone was willingly elected to the politically neutral role of Presiding Officer). The SNP has no reason to allow them to play a ‘kingmaker’ role given its own 64 seats. And, the Greens got nowhere near displacing Labour as they said they hoped to.

The much-heralded great disrupters of Scottish politics decidedly disappointed. One was to wreck the union and the other was to save it. Despite the widespread initial publicity given to Alex Salmond’s new Alba party, not only did he not return to Holyrood but Alba barely gained 45,000 votes across the whole of Scotland, representing just 1.7%. Clearly, voters dislike Salmond and were not convinced by the ‘free pass’ argument of vote SNP in the constituencies and don’t waste your list vote on it in order to create a ‘supermajority’ for independence. They did want to waste their list vote – all 1.1m of them. Alba supporters will no doubt try to salvage something...
by saying they are now ‘on the pitch’ and have 2 MPs and a few councillors (all of which defected from the SNP) from which to build from. But this is special pleading for Alex Salmond, their ‘great communicator’, will find it difficult to communicate to the masses without being in Holyrood. Alba is another lesson in the huge difficulties of breakaway parties from established parties (as the Scottish Labour Party found in the 1970s when it broke from Labour).

‘Gorgeous’ George Galloway has long since stopped being greeted as such at the polling booths. That last time was in 2012 in Bradford despite various other forays since. His ‘All for Unity’ attempt for the list seats (securing just 23,000 votes across Scotland) included urging people to vote Tory where necessary in the constituency seats. Like with Salmond’s Alba, it shows that successful new political entities cannot be magicked out of thin air in next to no time.

The far left had another miserable showing despite their being fewer far left parties standing. This was not a case of unity though. Solidarity, led by Tommy Sheridan, joined Action for Independence (see below) and the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP) did not stand as it saw the pandemic restrictions as making campaigning for it not worthwhile. Instead, it concentrated upon its campaign for a publicly-owned National Care Service. The Socialist Labour Party, led by Arthur Scargill, did not stand. Though not standing in all list regions and constituencies, the Communist Party and the Scottish Trade Union and Socialist Coalition gained less than 4,000 votes between them.

Whilst 34 MSPs did not stand for re-election (up from 20 in 2016, 24 in 2011, and 14 in 2007), it is not expected that the left will be well represented within the new batch of 43 MSPs as Neil Findlay, John Finnie, Elaine Smith and Alex Neil have departed. We do hope, however, that Carol Mochan (Labour, and Secretary of the Campaign for Socialism) and Maggie Chapman (Greens) will do their best uphold the left. We have a vested interest in this as both Carol and Maggie are members of the editorial committee of the Scottish Left Review.

When it comes to the issue of independence and another referendum, it’s surely a case of ‘All hail the chief’ with Sturgeon. She - and the SNP - have won the case for caution and conditionality. Saying there won’t be a push for another referendum until the pandemic is over was clever footwork. It assuaged some of the concerns of those considering voting SNP, especially with support for independence in polls falling since March, and now, post-election, gives her ample latitude to decide when to go for it. All the evidence suggest that will not be anytime soon.

But standing back from this, several things become apparent. There’s still not much of an SNP strategy to gain a Section 30 order if Johnson refuses one. And, other than a renewed SNP-dominated mandate for independence, how much different is the situation from before? There were 69/129 pro-independence MSPs and there are now 72/129 pro-independence MSPs. More than a simple majority but not a supermajority that Johnson would find less easy to ignore. Indeed, the pro-independence list vote was just 50.1%.

Some have speculated that the only way Johnson would agree to a referendum would be if he was sure of winning one, mostly likely a case of a post-pandemic V-shaped economic recovery that would be seen as a credit to UK PLC. Yet there was one important difference. In 2016, the mandate was less specific for a referendum and based on unknown outcomes (like Brexit). This time it was explicitly stated in SNP and Green the manifestos of both the SNP and Greens. Maybe that was why Gordon Brown intervened again with his ‘save the Union (via a constitutional inquiry) from its Tory destruction’ message.

For the left inside the SNP and the pro-independence left outside of it, the problems are multiplying. First, all Alba failed and that was after Action for Independence (formerly Alliance for Independence) and the Independence for Scotland Party threw their lot in with it by standing down for the election.

Even though organisations like All Under One Banner and Now Scotland are neither electoral organisations nor political parties, this will make their jobs that bit harder. It will depress some of their activists and followers. Second, much of the SNP left decamped to Alba. That means the left inside the SNP is now weaker and it is unlikely that the defectors will be allowed back in to the SNP anytime soon. This particularly affects the Commonweal group inside the SNP given that it made advances in the internal SNP elections earlier this year. Third, the street strategy of All Under One Banner and Now Scotland is unlikely to be able to exert much pressure on Sturgeon with her renewed and slightly enhanced mandate.

Returning to the Dickens analogy, it was not so much a case of a ‘Tale of Two Cities’ as a tale of two or more countries. In Wales, things could not be more different than in Scotland. Labour secured 30 seats, just one shy of a majority, there are no Greens members and the SNP’s equivalent, Plaid Cymru, trails the Tories. Labour will govern on its own. In England, Labour got trounced in all but a few places like Liverpool, London and Manchester. The main problem Labour has – and has failed to recognise -is that the Tories are spending money rather than cutting it so the argument of not spending enough is a much more difficult one to make. Starmer being a competent parliamentary performer does not alter this. His ‘management’ of Labour is increasingly in doubt after the Rayner debacle. But more importantly, he is surely on the slide now because the ‘red wall’ continues to crumble with Hartlepool and the council elections. We will return to this issue as the balance of forces between Labour and the Tories in England has significant implications for politics in Scotland, especially in regard of independence.

All in all, maybe not so much as case of old wine in new bottles but maybe more old parties in old parliaments.

Three tales of a single city

The tremendous victory in Kenmure Street was followed by mass civil disobedience of a very different kind in George Square two days later. The next day thousands of citizens of Glasgow marched from George Square in solidarity with the Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank. The police response to each was somewhat dissimilar. We shall look at these matters in the next issue.
Was it another unique election? Only if you ignore the ‘big picture’ issues

Looking behind the election facts and figures, James Mitchell reveals the continuing, underlying dynamics of politics in Scotland

There is always something in any election to justify the claim that it was unique and the 2021 Holyrood election has many claims. It was fought against the backdrop of a pandemic. Turnout was the highest on the record at 63% and was up across all parts of Scotland. The SNP achieved a fourth term in a row and missed repeating its best ever result in 2011 by the narrowest of margins. Labour suffered its worst defeat. More women (45%) were elected than previously. The first – three - women of colour were elected. The first member of the Sikh community was elected. But what it is most likely to be remembered for are the consequences of the clear majority that support an independence referendum.

In one respect, the election was anything but unique. Scotland’s constitutional status has been a perennial issue in Scottish elections and will likely remain so as far into the future as it is possible to see, not least because it concerns a set of relationships. And relationships always evolve because the partners to any relationship never remain static and the context in which they operate is always changing around them. The notion that there is a ‘settled will’ is a slogan that is only ever appropriate in passing. It might settle when it comes to a constitutional or legal relationship but that is a very narrow, albeit not insignificant, definition of what is important.

One feature of Scottish politics these last 14 years, set to continue over the next few years at least, is that every party is an opposition party. The SNP and Tories are each governing and opposition parties while all the others are just opposition parties. This makes for a distinct kind of politics. The SNP has become masterful in riding these two horses simultaneously and did so again. With a record in government that would have put it on the backfoot if that alone had been the ground on which the election was fought, the SNP preferred to make this an election about Boris Johnston. Not only did it seek to do so to attack the Tories but it sought to put Labour on the defensive by conflating support for the union with support for the Westminster Tory Government. The Scottish Tories were as keen to pretend Johnson did not exist as the SNP was to act as if he was a candidate in the election.

Being in office offers status, power and access. And the SNP was understandably keen to take advantage of its incumbency. While the civil service adopts an entirely neutral position during elections, it plays a legitimate part in the development of policies throughout a Parliamentary term. And some of this will inevitably find its way into manifestos. It would be odd for an incumbent party to announce a radical change of policy from that which had gone before or one that did not flow from existing policy development. In addition, interest groups and lobbyists seek to attach themselves to parties in office like limpets. Pressure groups are the ‘weather vanes of power’. This has a number of consequences. Parties gain access to expertise and the possibility of endorsements. But the downside is that this can result in undue and asymmetrical influence. If interest group politics was truly pluralistic, with each sectional group having an equal and opposite alternative like Newton’s third law of motion, and all had equal access to power, then there would be the possibility of balance. But as Eric Elmer Schattschneider, the great American political scientist, famously put it: ‘The flaw in the pluralist heaven is that the heavenly chorus sings with a strong upper-class accent’. Over decades now, this imbalance has grown.

Political parties aggregate these organised interests to provide manifestos setting out plans for government and some interests are better resourced and organised. Of course, some parties are ideologically disposed to one set of interests more than others. That had been the basis of class politics of old: Labour favoured unions and the Tories favoured business. Each had its anchor preventing drift, though sometimes the tide of public opinion moved in the desired direction. At other times, the tide was so strong that office was all but unobtainable without throwing the anchor overboard. Class voting at its peak offered a binary choice. And parties without a clear class identification positing as centrists struggled to insert themselves into debate and voters’ consciousness. There was always the opportunity for centrists to pick up support but it was limited.

But the SNP is a different kind of party. There are many explanations for its rise but a key part of the backdrop is the decline of class voting so allowing new forms of politics emerged. Parties competed on the territory of competence especially as policy distinctions between them declined. The SNP’s past problem was being damned as tartan Tories in left-leanimg Scotland and as a socialist party in Tory areas. The absence of a clear ideological position – and this was more about image than policies – blurred its image. It needed to place itself unambiguously on one side of the dominant left-right debate or shift the debate firmly onto a centre-periphery axis. It has managed more or less to do both. Thirty years ago, it set out to clarify its position as a party of the left though in recent times it has set out to present itself as a party capable of competence in office and sought to appeal to business while retaining its social democratic credentials. It became a catch-all party with light ideological baggage turning the adaptability which had undermined it in the era of class politics into a formidable electoral machine.

But it has not all gone the SNP’s way, not least as it retains an element that welcomed its leftist image and is uncomfortable with the drift rightwards mimicking New Labour. The SNP’s Growth Commission was more a political than an economic project to convince business that it could be trusted and independence. Internal dissidents suggest it has been unsuccessful in attracting or even retaining business support while succeeding in upsetting the SNP’s left.

But, of course, the SNP has an unambiguous position on the centre-periphery axis. A generation ago, Labour could claim to be Scotland’s national party in terms of breadth of support but also in standing up for Scotland. The
SNP moved in on space vacated by ‘new’ Labour on the left and even its support for independence meant that Unionists tended to see the SNP as standing up for Scotland. The salience of independence in the election worked to the advantage of the SNP and Tories in much the same way that class politics worked before to the advantage of Labour and the Tories. Labour has joined the LibDems in being squeezed on the centre-periphery axis.

The SNP’s course is set but it has a light anchor when it comes to interest articulation. Its leadership has to keep the troops happy, showing evidence that independence remains its ‘north star’. All SNP leaders have faced criticisms that they are not navigating to the promised land but have put down anchor preferring office to the pursuit of that goal. Sturgeon faced criticisms from enemies within her party for failing to advance the independence cause while being attacked by outside opponents for pursuing independence to the exclusion of all else. There had been considerable evidence of unease inside the SNP prior to the election with deep divisions on strategy, economy, currency and gender. But internal grievances do not easily translate into electoral support for breakaway parties. Alba’s biggest mistake was to think that it could attract voters who were largely uninterested in, if even aware of, these internal SNP battles. It takes more than attracting disaffected party activists and members to win electoral contents even in a party with the SNP’s large membership.

While the SNP does not have the ideological anchors of other parties its manifesto reads as if written by a committee of various interests. There is a sense it allowed itself to be captured by a variety of interests - though it may equally be said that many interests have been captured by the SNP. There is a symbiotic relationship that works for both party and groups. One of the constraints on interest group capture is thriving party democracy and a healthy independent think tank sector either directly or indirectly linked to the party. The SNP has neither.

What was also notable about the election was the extent to which so much was subsumed into debates on Scotland’s constitutional status. The extent to which this took place varied by party. The Tories have almost become a single-issue party which accounts for it retaining its position as Scotland’s second party with 31 seats. While the Greens were described as the SNP’s little helpers, the Tories were undoubtedly the SNP’s big helpers. The Tories needed the constitution to top the agenda to evade focus on the party in power in London.

There has been much commentary since devolution on ‘valence politics’. A distinction is often drawn between position and valence issues. ‘Position’ concerns matters on which the electorate is divided and parties have to take sides. Examples are specific issues like nuclear disarmament or nuclear energy. ‘Valence’ concerns matters on which there is broad agreement and voters choose which party is deemed most likely to deliver or have most credibility. Across a broad range of issues, there is little to choose from between two or more parties in the election. Who doesn't claim to believe in a more successful economy, protecting the NHS, improving educational standards etcetera? The question for the voter becomes who is most trusted and credible in delivering these. And a crucial valence question has long been who will best stand up for ‘Scotland’? And when that issue is seen as important, there is now only one likely winner. But that was not always the case. Labour previously managed to become Scotland’s national party for years before devolution. Part of reason this has changed is that ‘standing up for Scotland’ is now closely associated with a party’s constitutional status.

Another valence issue that the SNP has successfully claimed has been gender in its various manifestations. The SNP has had significant success in address its previously relatively weak support amongst women. Where it has struggled, however, has been with respect to trans rights. This is a tricky area in which competing principles have clashed. In such circumstances, the best course is to tread carefully, listen and seek to accommodate different views. The SNP blundered into this in the belief that there were votes to be won amongst young elements in the electorate and have had to retreat, promising to work with a wide range of people to improve rights which will ‘not affect the rights or protections that women currently have under the Equality Act’.

The relationship between Scotland’s constitutional status and ‘standing up for Scotland’ is an example of how ‘position’ and ‘valence’ issues interact. Evidence exists that there are voters who oppose independence and see independence as contrary to Scotland’s best interests but nonetheless see the SNP’s support for independence as a sign of a deep commitment to Scotland and a willingness to stand up for Scotland. And another referendum offers reassurance that voting SNP does not directly lead to independence.

Scottish politics is framed around a centre-periphery axis that combines the valence issue of ‘standing up for Scotland’ and competent government with positions on Scotland’s constitutional status. The 2021 election suggests that competence may not be as important as it was in the previous three Holyrood elections. With a 14-year record in office that only loyalists could describe as impressive in public policy terms, the SNP romped home with little opposition.

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Scottish politics are defined by many factors - fourteen years of SNP dominance, seven years of Nicola Sturgeon as First Minister, and the arrogance of Westminster. But underlying these factors at home is the sense of autonomy and difference, and contributing to these is the reach of Scottish nationalism and sentiment of Scottish social democracy. Yet with these latter two forces, things are not quite as simple and straightforward as they first appear. And, they throw up big issues which warrant further investigation for the sake of politics and self-government.

The establishment of the Scottish Parliament has changed our politics and become part of the everyday fabric of public life. But while it has as an idea become the new normal compared to pre-1999, it has also articulated a form of politics of institutional and system capture – under Labour and now the SNP. With the latter as with the former, incumbency always comes at a cost, irrespective of what headline figures say. Away from the SNP’s impressive record in winning four Holyrood elections in a row, the party’s political antennas – internal and external – are increasingly becoming desensitised by the length of its period of office and dominance of the political landscape.

Take the state of social democracy. It has become a cliché through the devolution era to refer to Scotland as a country defined by social democracy. But if this has any truth, then it is a very thin kind of political philosophy and outlook. One which has a lack of intellectual ballast as well as a vagueness about its values and what it stands for – as opposed to what it is against, namely, Blairism and ‘new’ Labour on the centrist-left and obviously Thatcherism of any kind. These rhetorical devices allow it to appear radical while actually being conservative and defensive.

These characteristics have been reinforced by years of Labour and now SNP dominance, parties which have seen it as in their self-interest to define social democracy in the manner of how UK Labour governments used to define socialism, namely, as what they do in office. This gives these parties room for manoeuvre and sense of morality while allowing them to be uber-pragmatic.

All of this has contributed to the record of 22 years of the Scottish Parliament. There has been much progressive rhetoric, initiatives and some intent, but across area after area there has been an absence of urgency, honesty and prioritisation. Take the 2021 SNP manifesto. In a difficult fiscal context, it makes all sorts of new offers to voters: free dentistry, and all sorts of small pots of money for this and that. What it does not do is promise to affect real change in many of the areas it is offering new monies, rather being content to be seen to do something. And scandalously, it does all this with no sense of priority: presiding over the atrophying of any local democracy and local services, while not daring to progress anything but the mildest redistribution of resources.

Similarly, Scottish nationalism might mostly be benign and cosmopolitan but it is also banal – which has contributed to its ubiquity. Scottish nationalism is not the ownership or property of the SNP – but rather can be found across the political spectrum – a point hard Labour unionists now ignore at their peril. In a public debate I did with Donald Dewar just before the establishment of the Parliament, he said in a typical Dewarism – ‘I am a Scottish nationalist with a small S’ – by which in his misspeaking he meant the distinction between nationalism with a capital ‘N’ and smaller ‘n’.

It is obviously a nationalism – different from the majority nationalism of the UK state. The Irish writer, Fintan O’Toole, has powerfully expressed the limits of nationalism in our or any debate, commenting that ‘it is like a rocket ship fuel’ in that ‘it can get you into orbit, but burns up quickly and offers no guidance for in terms of direction of travel or what to do once in orbit.’ That is a pithy summary of the characteristics of Scottish nationalism which have contributed extensively to our sense of nationhood and difference but, ultimately, does not provide a road map for governing Scotland, whether devolved or independent.

Scottish nationalism and the SNP alone will not be enough to win any independence referendum on their own. They don’t have the range of appeal or votes. This is true numerically of the SNP which has never won a majority of the popular vote – in 2015 when it won 49.97% of the vote and in 2021 when it won 47.7% of the constituency vote.

There is a similarity here between the SNP and Labour at their peaks. Scottish Labour never ever won a majority of the popular vote, hitting a high of 49.9% in 1966 heralding Harold Wilson’s second term. Hence, this meant that non-Labour Scotland was always a majoritarian force compared to Labour, with fears of majority Labour rule a critical fear factor among non-Labour voters. This was a critical issue in the 1979 devolution referendum when Labour’s plans for a 145-150 seat ‘first-past-the-post’ Scottish Assembly were seen as deeply unattractive by non-Labour voters who preferred the existing status quo of Westminster rule compared to one party rule by Labour on a minority of votes.

Fast forward through eighteen years of Tory Government to the 1997 devolution referendum and by then Labour had learnt the lessons from 1979. It had realised it could not win on its own. It had recognised the limited appeal of Labour one party rule and agreed to a 129 seat Parliament elected by proportional representation – and hence the likelihood that parties, Labour included, would be minorities. Of fundamental relevance to the present day, Labour recognised that it could not convincingly win a devolution referendum just with Labour and Lib Dem voters, but needed the votes of SNP supporters too. This led to a choreography of events leading up to the 1997 referendum to make sure that Labour, Lib Dems and SNP would officially take part in a genuine cross-party campaign to aid an emphatic majority for a Parliament - which is what happened.

A future independence referendum cannot be won by the SNP alone; nor can it won convincingly by just SNP and Green voters. Rather, it will require
Labour and even Lib Dem voters and those of no party. This will require the creation of a genuine cross-party campaign unlike 2014 and more like 1997: less ‘Yes Scotland’ and more ‘Scotland Forward’. The 2014 ‘Yes’ campaign body was not a genuine cross-party independent organisation, not having enough autonomy and distance from the SNP, whereas the 1997 campaign was.

One constant running through politics is that dominant parties find it difficult to cede a degree of control and power to others, regarding all their competitors as not equals and somehow less than they are. This is how Labour viewed Scotland in the 1979 vote; only learning from the sum of its mistakes by 1997. Similarly, the SNP in 2014 went through the pretence of being cross-party but retained control. For any future vote, it will to have to understand what it gains by having the insight and intelligence to let go, loosen up and give up a degree of control.

This brings us to the defining political credos of a future Scotland. Perhaps, the politics of a future referendum can offer a prefigurative shape of the best of a post-independence country. As Scottish nationalism and the SNP on their own cannot win, any coalition of support has to draw ecumenically from Scotland’s other political traditions: from Labour and the union movement; from the social democratic and communitarian traditions; from democratic socialists, radical leftists, Greens, feminists, anti-statists, liberals and those who simply believe in democracy and Scotland’s right to decide. This should well-handled, be a strength not a weakness, but it will require an awareness from those in the SNP of the limits of their appeal and politics.

One political authority who understood the above was the late Nigel Smith, the organiser of the 1997 devolution referendum campaign who created the body which brought SNP, Labour and Lib Dems together to make the case for the Parliament. He was anti-independence in 2014, but in early 2020, just before he died, he recognised that the issue was not settled, telling me: ‘This is not a settled issue, but rather a live one which has to be concluded one way or another by at some point having another independence referendum.’

As someone who was an authority on referendums, he told me at the time that ‘Yes’ had to avoid hubris next time, believing its own hype and that it was automatically going to win. Since 2014, there has been an absence of heavy lifting in terms of rethinking independence, its offer and how it is presented, and understanding how it lost in 2014. This is not to say there has not been some exemplary work by the likes of Voices for Scotland on campaigning and messaging. More that, it has just been nowhere enough. Smith put it powerfully: ‘There is a lack of understanding and analysis of 2014 by the SNP. If they don’t fully know why they lost, how do they make a new case?’ It is that simple: understanding electoral defeat is a key to catharsis and renewal and it has been until now mostly missing.

Seven years after the first independence referendum, we have seen little serious work by the SNP to remake the independence offer or an awareness that next time the offer - process, tone, campaign and its structure - will have to be completely different. It cannot offer the Panglossian, bright shiny continuity and insistence that everything will be just fine under independence of last time. Rather, there has to be a profound understanding of the nature of risk, and accepting that there is risk inherent in independence – with the central question being who manages it and in whose interests.

This entails the wider independence movement finding a different path than the binary choice between SNP caution and the impatient voices wanting an instant referendum as soon as possible. That means recognising the different constituencies who will contribute to making a convincing majority and recognising the many strands of those who have yet to be convinced of independence.

Alongside this, the fundamental inadequacy of status quo – a ‘steady as she goes Scotland’ on offer from the SNP and Scottish Government - needs to be challenged by serious, detailed work and politics, coming up with ideas and proposals for changing and healing our society. But more than that, in an age where the political philosophies of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are exhausted, compromised and hollowed out, we need to come up with notions of what our defining credos and political values should be.

After the failure of neo-liberalism and collapse of social democracy, how do we put together a political project and philosophy which champions redistributing power, resources and opportunities, and then links it to the cause of greater self-government? We should at least be asking the question – because Scottish nationalism is an inadequate guide for the future and the conservative character of what passes for social democracy here is not up to the challenges we will face.

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Lots of labouring still be done for Scottish Labour

Carol Mochan says there’s a mountain of political leg work needed but that it can be done

Scotland’s status as a devolved nation worthy of its place on the world stage is in no doubt after yet another well contested election. But the most recent campaign did little to evidence the life changing debates going on in our country and, where serious alternatives were presented, they were drowned out by the constitution – again. The pandemic should have sparked renewed attention to the arguments of the left, but with the UK government perceived to have handled the vaccination programme well and the popularity of the SNP still incredibly consistent despite a decade of underwhelming managerialism, it was not to be.

I stood again in my home constituency of Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley and as the second placed candidate for Scottish Labour on the South Scotland list. As such, I am in the strange position of now writing as an MSP representing the region I am from and have raised my family in after my party secured three list MSPs for the region. I hope from that position I am able to reflect both on the limited successes of the campaign and the failures.

There is no doubt that it could have been worse for Scottish Labour, as was made abundantly clear by results coming in from Hartlepool and many English councils over the days following the 6 May election. But at the same time, we cannot present our worst ever electoral performance in a Scottish Parliament election as a good result. Socialism has to be built on an honest assessment of what the people of this country are telling us and based on that it is clear we have once again not done well enough.

In my own constituency, a place that was once one of the safest Holyrood seats for Scottish Labour, we finished third behind the Tories for the first time ever. I was over 18% behind the winning SNP candidate and I know that despite the COVID pandemic restrictions we did a great deal to speak directly to voters in the area. The sad fact is though we are no longer met with anger on the doorsteps or the phones, what remains is a worrying indifference. Labour simply is not seen as a serious challenger to the SNP by most and those who remain wedded to our cause are clear that for many of their friends and family the SNP is now the obvious anti-Tory vote. In order for Labour to have taken the anti-SNP (or more accurately the anti-independence) vote, it would have to come from behind and usurp Douglas Ross’ faltering Scottish Conservatives. When the dust settled over the weekend following the election count, we were not even close. That is of serious existential concern to a party that once utterly dominated Scottish political life. For two elections running, the Scottish Conservatives have effectively mounted a very simple list campaign targeted at unionist voters when at times, in Scottish Labour, it seemed our messaging was designed primarily to maintain the three constituencies we held on to in 2016. Overall, our vote dropped across Scotland in terms of the constituencies and the regional lists, and on the latter the Tories were comfortably ahead of my party. In a ‘first-past-the-post’ system we would be heading for Liberal Democrat levels of annihilation, I take that very seriously, and I know my colleagues do as well. Yet now the election is over and we did manage to secure 22 MSPs there is time and space to build a new alternative. It will be no surprise to anyone who knows me that I believe the policies and priorities of Labour’s 2017 ‘For the Many, Not the Few’ manifesto should be the model for how we begin again. Popular targeted socialist investment is not the past – it is an absolutely necessary future. In fact, outside of the 2017 General Election, Scottish Labour has not advanced its share of the vote in a Scotland-wide election since Gordon Brown was Prime Minister in 2010. It seems odd then that ever since so little has been done to understand why Jeremy Corbyn bucked the trend. For me it is obvious: he presented an image of a completely different Labour Party and a new Britain separated from the economic greed of the past. That should be at the forefront of our thinking going into next year’s council elections and beyond.

Fortunately, there was a distinct emphasis on an investment led recovery in Scottish Labour’s 2021 manifesto. This reflected a fact I witnessed time and again whilst campaigning, namely, voters do not want another referendum when the worst economic effects of the pandemic are yet to hit. Scottish Labour correctly attempted to move the emphasis towards the future of work and improving incomes by guaranteeing every young person a job and developing a community recovery fund that was not simply a soundbite. These building blocks are now in place, and alongside the clearly set precedent that Labour can never again return to being a party of austerity, there is a basis for pushing forward with a radical platform based on the needs of the many not the few. I see it as my duty to deliver those promises as best I can and to hold my party to its commitments.

It would not be a Scottish election analysis without mention of the constitution. I have been a candidate and a campaigner in innumerable elections now in which Scottish Labour has campaigned on an unclear constitutional platform, an issue on which the membership is for the most part split. As someone who has always backed a reformed union with our friends across this island (and will continue to do so), I am, of course, dismayed that again we have seen a gigantic victory for the SNP – a party that does not appear to prioritise helping the poor or building the sort of state that can truly tackle economic inequality. Yet instead, it seeks to capitalise on the politics of separation. This is not news and we should not have expected anything else, nor is it news that the Conservatives have one policy and one policy alone - protecting the interests of the union without an inch of reform. It is difficult to understand how Scottish Labour can break free of that vice without either mimicking the Tories or laying out their own alternative to nationalism and the status quo.

Despite promises from leaders of the left, centre, and right of the party that alternative has never seriously come to fruition and it is obvious that the notion of federalism remains largely academic with little public support. If we reach the next Scottish Parliament election with...
the same muddled priorities, I think it is more than likely our vote will drop further.

Fundamentally, the Labour Party has at its very foundation the concept of self-determination. Given the SNP and Scottish Greens are highly likely to form the government, either formally or informally, it is impossible for my own party to claim there is not an appetite in a large part of the country for another referendum. Whether Nicola Sturgeon will actually attempt to hold one is uncertain, few have done as well as her at stoking the flames of separation. Why would she stop now? Despite this, I would warn against removing ourselves from the territory of calling out the SNP’s hypocrisy on this matter.

It is absolutely clear that we were told the 2014 referendum would settle the matter for a generation and given the large mandates the SNP have won off the back of a perceived democratic deficit, it is deeply concerning that they have done so little with it. Let’s not forget Scotland is now the drugs death capital of Europe, we have suffered two years of gargantuan incompetence regarding school exams, and we are sitting with a public spending deficit of over £15 billion (a figure set to only get worse due to Covid-19) with little to show for it. Under these conditions, it will take a great leap to convince a majority of Scots they want to go over the economic cliff edge into Andrew Wilson’s vision of a country built for the rich at the expense of the poor (as laid out in the report of the Sustainable Growth Commission).

What space for the left of the Scottish Labour Party in the years to come then? I cannot pretend the left is well organised within the party and in terms of targeted activism and education, there is a lot of work to be done. Sadly, some of the brightest young minds of our movement either took on party roles during the Corbyn era or felt underwhelmed by the perhaps inflexible nature of groups on the left that are slow to respond and overly focused on talk rather than action. It is no surprise also that many people who joined the party to support Corbyn’s vision of a compassionate socialist state have subsequently left in light of decisions by Starmer’s administration to distance themselves from that vision. Combine this with the party still not publishing the findings of the Forde Inquiry, sacking popular member-focused regional secretaries, not voting against parts of the Spycops Bill, sacking all of the Community Organisers who did their best to bring about a new form of grassroots organising, as well as pushing out of the cabinet anyone vaguely left wing, and I think we could be in for a concerning decline in the number of people we can deploy as members to get out our message.

There is, however, cause for positivity in Scotland as we saw Monica Lennon run for the leadership on a cohesive left wing platform that gained the support and attention of a lot of people both within and without the party. Equally four endorsed candidates were elected this May including Katy Clark, Paul Sweeney, Mercedes Villalba and myself. Add this to the presence of Richard Leonard and other MSPs with a history of taking a clearly left Labour outlook and you have the biggest left wing grouping in the Scottish Labour Parliamentary Party for some time.

My message to members across Scottish Labour then is this. We can organise for a serious socialist future, but you have to get involved. In the age when social media posturing online has become the currency of activism for some, some will have to wake up from that. It’s a smokescreen and an echo chamber. I am one of the least likely people to ever become an MSP, I never saw myself in this position, but it happened because I saw the devastating effects of austerity on ordinary people who are under the boot of capitalism.

I want you to come to Holyrood with me, but it starts on the streets and doorsteps of Scotland. I will see you there.

Carol Mochan is a Labour MSP for the South of Scotland and secretary of the Campaign for Socialism group within Scottish Labour (http://www.campaignforsocialism.org.uk/). She is also a member of the editorial committee of the Scottish Left Review.

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**Generational generosity**

Let the old and knackered who are within five years of their state retirement age retire early. Their jobs should be ‘swopped’ with an unemployed person under the age of 25. Such a scheme is likely to be cost neutral as the extra cost of paying early state pension is offset by the reduction in dole payments and savings in mental and physical health provision. This would be a proper job swap scheme. It would not apply to those at the top of the scale and at the end of their career who want to swap with an incoming trainee on lower pay and conditions. In consequence, it would apply more to manual employees such as cleaners, drivers, supermarket workers and all others that can swap their job on a ‘like-for-like’ basis. It’s about time manual workers got a break. Moreover, it is these jobs which would make a dent in youth unemployment. If the government agreed a job swap scheme for state pension payments, unions could demand the same from company pension schemes.

*Mick Rice, secretary, UNITE Retired Members branch, Glasgow*
How the left won the Scottish Green Party and how that will change Scottish politics

Maggie Chapman looks back on not just a quantitative but also qualitative shift for the Scottish Greens

The Holyrood 2021 election reflected a number of trends that we have seen in previous elections, but gives significant hope for workers’ rights, a just transition, a second referendum and the left in Scottish politics.

The first trend is that the Greens have a fully developed analysis of what needs to be done. This is partly due to a broader development in the environmental movement, and partly due to the broader shifts in politics. But it is, in no small part, due to a concerted intervention by radicals in the Scottish Greens over the past decade and a half. This has allowed the development of a political programme based on a just transition from fossil fuel dependence to zero carbon. When contrasted with the emerging ‘green capitalism’, this becomes globally significant.

Those of us in the Greens who argued that our politics should be first and foremost about the transition of the economy to one based on care, creativity and collaboration have finally won the argument in our party. Policies that were historically contentious, like free public transport, have become Green wins. Combining social justice with decarbonisation is essential to make sure that the transition to zero carbon becomes a driver of equality, rather than just another fix for capital. We see from the Gilet Jaunes (yellow vests) protests in France how attempts to divorce climate justice from workers lives will end. The engagement of the left in the Greens shows how a progressive party can be comprehensively won for the left.

There can be no social justice without climate justice. Climate action without social justice will become a site of resistance by workers. So, we must take a just transition approach to build a Green economy. One that values peace, human rights and human dignity as well as tackling the climate and nature emergencies.

The second trend is that this election crystallised the current culture war in a contest for list seats in the Scottish Parliament. The Alba Party’s intervention on a platform opposing what they called ‘the Queer agenda’ created a very clear division for pro-independence voters on the list: either Greens with a substantial history of fighting for equality or Alba rehashing arguments from the 1980s campaign against gay liberation. I was delighted that voters across the country chose equality. For some time, people have made the argument that the Scottish public is resistant to trans rights. The contention was that the electorate would vote out those who support trans people given the chance. It turns out that much of the assertion that trans people’s rights were unpopular was based on social media bubbles and a misunderstanding of the issues. That’s not to underplay the ongoing assault on trans people, who still need our solidarity. It is just to note that those who saw attacking trans rights as an easy ticket to parliament lost and lost badly, despite their assertion that this was widely popular. Both Alba and the Greens are committed to a second referendum, so the seats won by the Greens show that the agenda in that referendum must be a progressive one, rather than that pursued by Alba.

The third trend is that the Greens have, for the first time since devolution in Scotland, run a campaign on the basis of policies rather than personalities or tactical voting messages. And gratifyingly, it delivered a much better result than at previous elections. This is a reflection of the end of the long 1990s, the era in which personality came to dominate politics. The left has persisted with personality politics long since it ceased being effective for progressive parties. Especially without the platform offered by government.

The focus on a transformational agenda always offered more for Greens. It is great that we were able to put this at the heart of our campaign. It resonated with everyone I spoke to during the election.

While Greens benefitted hugely from an effectively deployed tactical voting message in 2003, this has become more of a problem than an opportunity for Greens in subsequent elections. Focusing on tactical voting messages distracts from the core political messages of any campaign - and that is now much truer of other particular parties! The current electoral system encourages far too much focus on tactical voting, and the intervention of Alba aiming to game the system should be a signal that we need to change. The system should be there to reflect voter intentions, not to create new political dynamics of its own. Obviously, there are other important issues, but one aim of proportional systems is to prevent considerations about how to game the electoral system becoming the focus of an election. The aim should be to have a system that enables more authentic political choices to be exercised. Most significantly, this would end the status of the Tories as an anti-independence list party, and allow a debate about what each party actually stands for.

There are challenging times ahead. We know that we have less than a decade to act decisively to halt the climate emergency. It is never too soon to stop abuses of human rights, and when we can do both things at once we need to seize the opportunity. The big challenge for the coming parliament will be reorienting away from the policies of the past. We have to move from road building to allowing more people to work from home in a way that increases their wellbeing. We must pivot rapidly from oil and gas to renewables, storage and the development of the caring economy. We need to build public support for these changes too. But the 2021 election was a good starting point. Scotland can become the place where the just transition is prefigured. It is time to get to work!

Maggie Chapman is the Green MSP for north-east Scotland and a member of the editorial committee of Scottish Left Review.
Onwards down the yellow brick road - the SNP will do what it says it has on its tin

Chris Stephens says the populace is behind the SNP’s prospectus for a socially just independent Scotland

Seven days after Scotland went to the polls to elect the most diverse parliament in its history and on the morning that new and re-elected MSPs were being sworn in, Home Office removals officers were carrying out a dawn raid in the city of Glasgow. Whatever motivated the timing and location of the attempt to evict and detain two asylum seekers, it was crass and insensitive to the point of stupidity to choose Pollokshields, one of the most multi-ethnic communities in Scotland where many of the residents were celebrating Eid. There has been speculation that it was a deliberate decision to attempt a forced removal on the day when the local MSPs’ attention was elsewhere and that a political point was being made to underscore the limits that the First Minister has over immigration policy. However, it’s more likely that ignorance and lack of political nous informed the action and serves as a classic illustration as to how divergent the politics of the UK have become.

There is a narrative that anti-immigration messaging plays well with a section of voters to explain Brexit and why ‘red wall’ seats turned and appear to be staying blue. When out campaigning, I encountered one woman who said she ‘just wanted things to be the way they used to be in the 1950s’, a hefty dose of nostalgia for a golden era that never was (especially for women). But on inquiring what she meant, sadly she said she wanted to see fewer black faces on the streets. I do believe that’s a minority view and it didn’t stop over 133,000 people voting for a high profile, former asylum seeker, Roza Salih who headed up the SNP list in Glasgow at a time when other parties were trying to gatecrash the SNP’s ‘Both Votes’ strategy. Nor did it stop the voters of Glasgow Kelvin electing the first woman of colour to Holyrood on constituency vote, Kaukab Stewart.

The key ‘take’ over the Battle of Kenmure Street, is that it was not a battle in the physical sense, but a battle of ideology, between the UK state which believes it can ride roughshod over human rights, and the people, who sought to defend those human rights. As it turns out, there are occasions when social media works as a campaigning tool, rather than just a means to reinforce opinion and mobilise party members in an election campaign. Activists had already prepared themselves by halting evictions of asylum seekers by Serco and had the networks in place to ensure people would gather to prevent this dawn raid. It also turns out that the practice of freedom of peaceful assembly also works.

The main lesson, however, is that as well as political representatives and activists, trade unionists, and campaigners gathering to prevent this raid, it was the reaction of the local people who turned up in large numbers to protect their neighbours that demonstrates the strong community spirit, anger, and determination to prevent the injustice that should make the Home Office and the UK Government rethink its ‘dawn raid’ strategy.

So how does this narrative of divergence from UK government policy sit within the context of the 2021 Holyrood election and do the results strengthen the case for independence?

There were a variety of opinions and counter-arguments about the best route to secure an independence referendum for months before the election. We saw the emergence of smaller ‘fringe’ independence parties, borne out of impatience and offering a very different vision of how best Scotland’s people should be offered the option to decide their future. These parties attracted people who had felt let down by internal squabbles within the SNP, and global pandemic notwithstanding, were anxious that Covid was being used to push independence as an option off the table.

Ultimately, though, these smaller parties such as Alba were never going to succeed and cut through with the average voter. This election came down to a straight choice for the people of Scotland. It was a choice between two futures. Were they going to put their trust in Westminster and Boris Johnson’s man in Scotland, Douglas Ross, or would they again put their trust in Nicola Sturgeon and the SNP to secure our recovery and, ultimately, deliver the commitments in the manifesto - including a second independence referendum? So, it’s fair to say this election was one of the most important since the creation of the Scottish Parliament, and it’s important to look back at where the SNP has come since then.

Up until the 1999 election, all votes were by ‘First-Past-The-Post’. In the last pre-devolution election, Labour gained 56 out of 72 seats from 46% of the vote, whereas the SNP got only 6 seats from 22%. A ‘fair’ proportion for the SNP would have been 16 SNP MPs. It was normally the case that MPs got elected with less than half of the vote, and organisations like the Electoral Reform Society described the remainder as ‘disenfranchised’ or, even, as ‘wasted votes’. Fortunately, the Scotland Act 1998 legislated to include some form of proportional representation for the new Parliament – a principle and policy long supported by the SNP and Liberals. Labour supported this with some reluctance - mainly as a means of achieving consensus and with an expectation of securing an ongoing Lab/Lib centrist majority that would squeeze out the left and the SNP. The law of unintended consequences meant that SNP and Green activists became full-time politicians/staffers, and although it was a slow start eventually public debate on Scotland’s future was amplified, not stifled by the creation of the Scottish Parliament. Nor should it be forgotten that proportional representation for local government elections in 2007 created even more opportunities for hundreds of local campaigners in the Greens and SNP to become semi-professional activists for independence.

The fortunes of the SNP fluctuated in the Scottish Parliament, but in 2011 it won 53% of seats on 45% of the constituency vote (44% on the list vote), and in 2016 it won 49% of seats on 47% of the constituency vote (42% on the list vote). This year, it won 49.6% of seats on 47.7% constituency vote (40.3% on the list vote).
In the last three elections, the SNP has, therefore, been proportionally over-represented in its results. Nonetheless, many people described the non-SNP list votes as being ‘wasted votes’. Taken along with recent polling showing a ‘Yes’ vote hovering around 50% - and the fact that the pro-independence parties got 56% of MSPs – it would appear that we have an even better majority than the polls or votes would indicate. We are not under-represented and that, therefore, takes us on to the ‘supermajority’.

An aim of the new pro-independence parties was to gain a ‘supermajority’ by winning even more regional MSPs, standing only on the list. This begs the question: Why? Even the UK’s unwritten constitution recognises a majority vote as a decision. Seeking a ‘supermajority’ only risked setting the bar unrealistically high for a mandate. Fortunately, the electorate – and much of the international community – seem to understand that a legitimate mandate has, indeed, been achieved, and a few more list seats were not needed to enhance that.

The question now is: where does this leave the pro-independence movement? Is it hopelessly divided and directionless? Far from it! It should now be apparent that there will be another referendum within the first half of the new term, possibly as early as summer next year. Local and national ‘Yes’ groups will become very busy with Covid restrictions now easing, and the Scottish Government will have a lot to do in preparing the legislation and re-writing its ‘offer’ to the voters in that referendum. Nothing concentrates the mind more than being busy on essential projects. The overwhelming majority of the ‘Yes’ movement’s members did not fall out with each other, simply recognising that there were different views on priorities and how to achieve them. A busy movement should easily put most of that aside, whereas our unionist opponents have clearly become more rattled and divided on how to respond. Both the Scottish Government and the broader ‘Yes’ movement have preparatory work to do before framing the ‘offer’ to the electorate. It is clear that the ‘offer’ of 2014 must change substantially. The interim suggestions of the Sustainable Growth Commission - on, for example, currency, austerity and debt – have now been overtaken and appear to be withering on the vine.

It’s important to recognise that this election saw the highest ever turnout in a Holyrood election. However, the Scottish election was not only the highest ever turnout, it was an election with the widest voter franchise of any UK election in history. The simple reality facing our opposition is that a pro-independence majority was returned with the promise of delivering a second referendum. No Westminster politician can, or should, be allowed to stand in the way of that.

The wishes of civic society need to be at the heart of a new prospectus for independence, proposing more credible and palatable answers to the currency issue, and proposing positive solutions to the economic and social quagmire that the Tories would impose on post-Brexit Britain. Workers’ rights need to be restored and enhanced, rather than trashed. Pensions must start moving towards the European norm. Scotland must become a place where all who live here feel at home.

Chris Stephens is the (SNP) MP for Glasgow South West since the 2015 general election. He is a member of the editorial committee of the Scottish Left Review.
Elections are important but radical social change comes from the bottom up

Surveying the political landscape, Linda Somerville asks: what will it mean for workers and the working-class?

Hailed by the media as the most important election yet for the Scottish Parliament, the 6 May plebiscite will, indeed, go down in history. Holding a national election while mainland Scotland was still living under significant restrictions was certainly a first. Voters also delivered the most diverse range of MSPs in the Parliament’s history - the first and second women of colour, a group of MSPs with disabilities including the first permanent wheelchair user, and an increase in the number of women, now totalling 45%.

Democracy was also reported to be a winner with record turnouts. This was even more remarkable since the outcome - the SNP remaining the largest party and forming the next Government - was not in doubt. There was no mention of those still not registered to vote nor those who did not make the rainy journey to vote. No one seemed interested in why they did not take part or who will represent their views. But, as the MSPs start their term of office, one question remains unanswered: Does this ‘historical’ election really make any difference to workers across Scotland?

As usual, on paper, all the parties had something to offer ranging from the LibDems’ proposal for £5,000 training bonds to reskill workers and their change career to Scottish Labour’s pledge to ensure no publicly procured contract uses zero-hour contracts. However, most of these manifesto commitments may never see the light of the debating chamber. The SNP held the headlines with populist promises of free kid bikes and free dental treatment. While welcome, these give-aways will not tackle the issues facing workers and their families who experience increasing job insecurity, rising living costs and declining public services.

And, all the parties focused on the need for economic recovery, setting out varying investment plans for green jobs. Yet there was a lack of ambition on tax to radically alter the current arrangements as they adhered to the longstanding narrative that tax hikes lose votes.

The SNP’s green recovery promised a range of low-carbon funding pots but their scale fell far short of the £13bn stimulus package the STUC argued for in its “People’s Recovery” plan. SNP plans for £1.5bn investment in its National Infrastructure Mission looks unlikely to tackle the looming jobs crisis. We need a transformative plan to tackle climate change and invest in green jobs. The Scottish Greens hope to deliver their pledge to invest £3bn in warm and zero-carbon homes and buildings. But their plans for 75,000 jobs relied on leveraging £7.5bn in private investment rather than a publicly-funded programme. What we need is a street-by street home retrofitting programme, funded nationally but directly delivered by local authorities and a publicly-owned energy company that designs, builds and generates renewable energy.

Young workers face huge challenges in the months ahead as furlough ends. With 13% of young people unemployed, many more have no idea if their jobs will return as large parts of hospitality and retail close permanently. The SNP pledge to provide free bus travel for under 22s is welcome for apprentices and young workers if public transport is a viable option for them. But the SNP manifesto has nothing to say on public transport ownership. Our call to support all workers and their families in a ‘People’s Recovery’ would ensure our buses were taken back into public control with free bus travel piloted in our major cities.

For those in work there are worrying trends as employers introduce insidious ‘fire-and-rehire’ to push workers into signing new contracts on inferior terms or pushed out the door. We welcome the SNP’s pledge to back our call for the devolution of employment law to Scotland and review its Fair Work criteria to include specific reference to ‘fire-and-rehire’. But we demand the practice is stamped-out of the public sector where colleges have used it.

One area of consensus across the parties was the need to focus on care as the pandemic laid bare the challenges of underfunding, staff shortages, complex contracting and low pay. The SNP’s pledge to deliver a National Care Service is a test of its commitment to public investment, worker representation and Fair Work. Our ‘People’s Recovery’ calls for removing the profit motive and the standardisation of workers’ terms and conditions, delivered through union-led collective bargaining. The Scottish Greens are committed to a publicly-owned national care service and have shifted their policy to support calls for care workers to be paid at least £15 per hour.

While issues of importance to workers were raised by unions throughout the election during hustings and online campaigns, Scotland’s mainstream media, pollsters, pundits and twittterati focused upon the constitution, often to the exclusion of other key issues. Analysis is not yet complete but we can be confident that part of the increased turnout was driven by voters’ determination to cast their ballot either for or against parties based on their stance on independence. The Parliamentary majority for independence cannot be ignored and we believe that the power to hold a referendum should rest with Holyrood, not Westminster, Government.

As we move beyond the pandemic, we can guarantee that the ruling class will use its representatives in Westminster to embolden rogue employers, attack workers’ terms and conditions, divide our communities with their phoney culture war and suppress resistance. The introduction of voter identification, the new policing bill, and the higher education freedom of speech law testify to this.

The next five years will be more important to workers than this election. We know that radical change is driven from the bottom up by collective action of working-class people not political parties, as evidenced by Glasgow’s community response to the forced removal of their neighbours by immigration officers. As always, we will not see the transformative change needed with bold and ambitious policies that materially improve the lives of working-class people in Scotland unless we organise to demand it.

Linda Somerville is a Deputy General Secretary at the Scottish Trades Union Congress (STUC). She tweets @lindasomervill. A summary of the STUC’ ‘People’s Recovery’ can be found in the Nov-Dec 2020 issue of Scottish Left Review (see https://www.scottishleftreview.scot/stucs-response-to-the-covid-calamity/).
Where now for Alba? And, what is to be done?

Kenny MacAskill looks back at Alba’s debut campaign and forward to its future

Sometimes in politics, as in life, the concept can be correct but circumstances and timing are wrong. And so, it was to prove for Alba in the Holyrood election. That an SNP vote on the list would be wasted and let in unionists was proven spectacularly correct. An even larger SNP vote saw even fewer list SNP MSPs returned. But what was sound in theory didn’t get through to reality. For Alba, it was too short a campaign with an almost total media blackout, disgraceful given past indulgences to UKIP, and with an SNP denial of the basic electoral arithmetic. That latter aspect is all the more ironic given Unionist tactical voting to save constituency seats, thus, denying the SNP an overall majority.

So where now for Alba? Well, with 2 MPs, 20 councillors and over 5000 members it’s not going away. That’s more MPs than Labour and more members than the Liberal Democrats - and no one’s calling for their dissolution. Indeed, the membership whilst disappointed in the outcome, has equally been energised by it. The justification for many in either leaving the SNP or joining Alba at all was simply reaffirmed on 6 May.

The electoral debate was changed by Alba’s arrival and it’ll continue to play a part in Scottish politics. Indeed, the outcome and some early declarations by the First Minister give further impetus to the Alba’s twin track push for independence and the promotion of a radical agenda. This election was too soon for Alba to succeed but the outcome justifies its birth, and ensures its necessity.

Of course, that does mean that the administration and bureaucracy of Alba will require to be formed but that’s well underway. Plans for an inaugural conference are in motion and enthusiasm is increasing. The mundane parts of democracy that can be dull and tedious are still vital. But the resource base is there and members can look forward to having the opportunity to set their constitution, elect their office bearers and debate and decide policy. For the need that was evident before the election for a hard and fast push for independence, as well as a radical platform, has only been confirmed by results both sides of the border.

Previously, Nicola Sturgeon had given a veto to Boris Johnson by ceding that a Section 30 Order was not only required but the only route. That sterile debate will continue as it suits both SNP and Tory to posture that they’re pushing hard for or defending vigorously respectively - even if the reality is that it’s a charade where both know it’s not happening anytime soon. But at least it keeps their partisan audience satiated.

Even that charade has now been manifestly rendered dated with the declaration that there’ll be no independence referendum before a coronavirus recovery. Well, how long’s that to be? The pandemic’s easing and vaccinations are being rolled out but the full economic impact is still to be felt. It’s going to get worse still as factories and businesses come out of furlough or rather don’t - either staying shut permanently or with a greatly reduced staff. It’s not that a recovery’s starting. It’s that the worst is still to come. Johnson doesn’t require to veto a Section 30 Order. All he has to say is ‘now is not the time’. The First Minister has no chance of giving the Prime Minister a veto but has allowed him to set the timing.

Besides, how can Scotland recover without the necessary economic and fiscal powers which Holyrood is denied? Limited borrowing powers and the absence of other fiscal levers, leave the Scottish Government impotent or, at best, beholden to Westminster. The house construction and building retrofitting so necessary for job creation, stimulation of the economy and the addressing of global warming will be limited. Instead, it’ll be Westminster pet projects that’ll be funded all delivered centrally and plastered with the obligatory Union Jack. Prospects for recovery, therefore, will be hindered from the outset and the journey to independence, which alone can change it, further delayed.

All that makes Alba’s case and the many who supported SNP this election will then see the merits of Alba’s case. Rhetoric on independence from the SNP Scottish Government will not be matched by tangible actions, let alone progress. Frustration at SNP on the constitution will also be mirrored on social and economic policy. Attacks on women’s rights will increase through the SNP/Green coalition on the Gender Recognition Act at least, if not on wider policy areas, and the general drift to centrist rather than radical action will only accelerate.

Electoral results both sides of the border also open up opportunities for Alba. Labour went backwards in Scotland this election despite Anas Sarwar’s able media performances. Constituency seats were only won through Tory transfers, and so radicalism there will have to be eschewed. Besides the real problem lies in the catastrophe that took place south of the border. There’s no cavalry coming over the hill from UK Labour and if it cannot win in England, it shows only independence can save Scotland.

So, it’s game on for Alba. Council elections next year will see Alba candidates promoting the cause of independence and espousing radical policies. Work on the policy issues of borders, currency, pensions and almost everything else that SNP have failed to do will be prepared. Alba will also work with others defending jobs and services and campaigning for independence as lockdown restrictions ease and people power can be unleashed.

Kenny MacAskill is the Alba MP for East Lothian

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Maggie Chapman  |  Bob Thomson
Bob Thomson  |  Vice Convener
The state of our nation’s health? Not great and not getting better after the election

**Dave Watson is the secretary of the Socialist Health Association Scotland**

There are plenty of new faces in the Scottish Parliament, but will they make any difference to the nation’s health? Even a pandemic that has killed more than 10,000 people in Scotland and has driven 25,000 to the mental health helpline did not put health at the centre of the debate. That is one of the worst outcomes in Europe, but when the comparison is with bungling Boris Johnson, the First Minister looks at least competent. The ‘mistake’ of discharging vulnerable elderly people into care homes at considerable cost to life didn’t dent this perception.

When health did get some attention, it was the NHS that was debated. In fairness, it is hard to criticise politicians for this as it always tops the voter’s health concerns. Almost everyone relies on this universal service, so everyone cares about it. In many ways, the NHS is a victim of its own success.

Lots of big numbers have been bandied about along with commitments to ‘support and renew our NHS as it recovers from COVID-19’ (SNP Manifesto). There is a genuine challenge for the NHS as it attempts to get back to normal. Over 100,000 patients are waiting for a critical diagnostic test, including cancer, and planned operations have dropped by 35% (Public Health Scotland, February 2021). The British Medical Association (BMA) and others have warned that the actual consultant vacancy rate is just over 15%, with nearly half of senior staff planning to retire in the next five years. For other NHS staff, the exceptional effort and trauma caused by COVID-19 has left them exhausted and will have a long-term impact on their health and wellbeing.

The promised 20% increase to NHS funding over five years sounds impressive, but at £500m a year, it is little more than a catch up from the £479m increase in 2016/17. As the Institute for Fiscal Studies analyses (April 2021) of the Scottish Government’s spending plans shows, it has not allocated the full Barnett ‘consequentials’ to the NHS. The difference in spending between Scotland and England has shrunk from 22% in 1999/00 to just 3% in 2019/20. This is not necessarily bad if the money was allocated to preventative spending in areas that impact Scotland’s persistent health inequalities. A point I will return to.

Other NHS reforms in the SNP manifesto got less attention. Abolishing dental charges at the cost of around £75m is a welcome reform, ending the last remaining routine care charge. However, dental services will take a long time to recover from the pandemic with the growing use of private care to access care. This should be an opportunity to expand NHS dentistry services, calling time on the small business model. This was in the Scottish Labour manifesto, along with a commitment to integrate GP services into the NHS.

The SNP manifesto also includes a commitment to ‘review the number, structure and regulation of health boards … to remove unwarranted duplication of functions and make best use of the public purse.’ This was a previous manifesto commitment, but nothing happened. It is achievable for acute services, but the barrier is community services. The creation of a National Care Service may be the opportunity to remove that barrier.

One positive development was the attention all the political parties gave to mental health services. Increasing spending to 10% of the frontline NHS budget would be an important step forward, along with doubling the spending on Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) and more preventative action. The scandal of drug deaths in Scotland has given greater focus to the issue, with promises of long-term funding. Still, most parties shied away from radical action as it requires the combination of devolved and reserved powers.

There was also a near consensus that social care needs to be reformed. There is a now clear majority in Parliament for creating a National Care Service with national collective bargaining. The debate will be about the degree of centralisation involved and funding. The SNP funding commitment barely does more than plug the funding gap and certainly won’t cover the necessary increase in care workers pay.

Less positive was the minimal attention given to Scotland’s deteriorating health inequalities. For SHA Scotland, this should be the biggest health priority. Professor Harry Burns attempted to insert this issue into the election debate (Herald 21 April 2021), highlighting the £4bn cost to the NHS Scotland in dealing with illnesses that can be directly linked to poverty and inequality. As he said: ‘Spending money to support struggling families will save billions across the life course. That is what this election should be about.’

Sadly, it wasn’t. The SNP manifesto barely mentions it, not surprising given their record in government, which has seen missed key targets on housing, fuel poverty and child poverty. Only Scottish Labour put increasing healthy life expectancy as their main health and care ‘national mission’. This demonstrates that we have much to do in persuading the wider public and then politicians that inequality is not just bad for the poor but also impacts our economy and society.

Overall, the election campaign did little to indicate that the new, sixth Scottish Parliament is prepared to take the radical action necessary to tackle Scotland’s pressing health issues. A few tweaks appear to be the limit of our national ambition.

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Social care in Scotland: People before profit!

Iain Ferguson shows why the case for a publicly-owned and controlled care service is unanswerable

On 19 April 2021, BBC Scotland published the Covid-19 deaths by care home in Scotland, based on Crown Office figures. They made grim and tragic reading. Of the 10,000+ Covid-related deaths, around a third - at least 3,400 - occurred in care homes. Deaths in care homes in Scotland were, in fact, higher than in any other part of Britain. As Public Health Scotland recently acknowledged one factor contributing to that toll may well have been the decision – based on a mixture of panic and ageism - to discharge almost 5,000 patients to care homes between 1 March and 31 May 2020, the vast majority of them untested. Given that 78 of those who were discharged had tested positive, this seems a distinct possibility. The comment of Richard Horton, editor of medical journal, the Lancet, that ‘one of the lasting legacies of Covid-19 will be the silent human destruction it wreaked on the most unprotected older members of society’ should have a particular resonance in a country which prides itself on being more caring than its southern neighbour.

But what the Crown Office figures also highlight is the extent to which the residential care of older people in Scotland is dominated by care providers whose primary concern in not the care of vulnerable people but rather their profit margins. Thus, in a list of the twelve care providers in whose homes most deaths occurred, ten are owned by large private care companies. Leading the pack both in terms of size and also the number of deaths is HC One with 523 deaths. HC One is the biggest care provider in Britain since the collapse of Southern Cross in 2011 (which it bought over). It came under the spotlight when one of its properties, Home Farm Care Home in Skye, was taken over by the Scottish Government last November, following outrage over ten deaths at the home. Private care home providers often plead poverty. Yet a Financial Times (10 May 2019) report in 2019 found that HC One had paid out more than £48.5m in dividends over the previous two years, despite claiming that local authority funding cuts have brought the sector to the brink of a financial crisis. The report also found that HC One had paid no corporation tax since 2011 (it is registered in Jersey and the Cayman Islands) but instead had received net tax credits of £6.5m since a reorganisation in 2014. Ironically, ‘HC’ stand for health and care and its logo includes the words, ‘The kind care company’.

Other major care providers in the top twelve include Advinia Healthcare (195 deaths), Four Seasons (165 deaths) and Care UK (75 deaths). Like HC One, several of these companies have headquarters in offshore tax havens, are financially highly unstable and are typically anti-union. Care UK, for example, became notorious in 2014 when it was involved in a bitter and protracted strike with 70 employees from Doncaster who had been transferred from the NHS to Care UK, only to find that their wages were being slashed by up to 35%.

It is not unreasonable to expect, then, that the ‘Independent Inquiry into Social Care in Scotland’, set up last November by Nicola Sturgeon under former NHS Scotland CEO, Derek Feeley, would have seen curbing of the power of these sharks and vultures as a priority. The most effective way to do this would be by bringing them back under public control. The profit motive has no place in the NHS. Why should it dominate social care? In fact, Feeley’s report explicitly ruled out that option:

The evidence suggests that nationalisation would not in and of itself improve outcomes for people using care ... Evidence from the pandemic indicates a correlation between size of care home and quality of care, with smaller facilities faring better than larger ones, but no evident link between type of ownership (public, private or third sector) and quality. We therefore think that the evidence does not support nationalisation into public ownership on the basis of improving the quality of care.

The Crown Office figures quoted above suggest exactly the opposite. And a key ingredient of good quality care is continuity of care, freedom on the part of residents and their families from the fear of losing their home and of staff of losing their jobs. As the collapse of Southern Cross in 2011 and Four Seasons in 2019 showed, however, continuity of care is one more thing that a market-based system of care cannot guarantee. As recently as March 2021, HC One announced the closure of ten homes in Scotland. There is nothing in Feeley’s proposed Social Covenant on social care that would prevent such closures and the massive distress they cause.

The outgoing SNP administration accepted Feeley’s proposal for the abolition of charges for home care, saying they would implement this ‘as soon as possible’ This is welcome, although it will probably take a campaign along the lines of the Bedroom Tax campaign to make this a reality. But we should go much further. The SNP Election Manifesto stated: ‘We believe social care services, just like health care services, should be provided on a truly universal basis, free at the point of use’. Good.

But that should apply not just to home care but to residential care. We should end the system where older people in NHS care pay nothing (rightly) while those in social care homes often pay eye-watering fees. That would mean a social care system, funded through a wealth tax, with much greater democratic control by workers and service users. A good starting point would be a moratorium on any new private sector involvement in social care. Anything less will mean simply tinkering at the edges of a system which the Covid-19 crisis has shown is broken beyond repair.

Iain Ferguson is co-editor of ‘People Before Profit: The Future of Social Care in Scotland’ available from https://www.calton-books.co.uk/books/people-before-profit-the-future-of-social-care-in-scotland/
How can SNP and Greens end the housing crisis in Scotland?

Regina Serpa argues the SNP promise of ‘a safe, warm, affordable home’ for all is possible with a pro-independence majority

Skimming the headlines for post-election autopsies, I find only a handful of political analyses that criticise the 2021 Scottish elections as ‘boring’ or ‘zombie’-like, which might be surprising given the lack of campaigning due to the ongoing pandemic, or the continuation of similar themes on from the 2016 elections - for example, another SNP victory, rising support for independence, and the further collapse of Scottish Labour. Personally, I eagerly awaited the sixth Scottish Parliamentary election more so than the five previous elections – as a new Scot, this was the first election I was eligible to vote in, after having become a UK citizen following 10 years of residency. I happily performed my new civic duty, scouring political manifestos and monitoring the editorial pages of journals and newspapers.

Being a life-long housing activist and early career housing academic, I was dismayed to see that only two of the 11 parties featured in BBC’s Scotland election manifesto guide – SNP and Greens – had mentioned ‘housing’ as a top political priority for 2021 – particularly disappointing after over a decade of a ‘housing crisis’ in Scotland. Perhaps, if the left had more prominence in BBC political coverage (and not just limited to mainstream political parties), housing would have likely assumed greater credibility as a major political issue.

Understandably, the crisis du jour (or perhaps more accurately, de jure) concerns public health, rather than bricks and mortar. However, I would suggest that there is more than enough space on the political agenda to address, today, the concerns of a generation (including, notably, the climate change emergency and the migration ‘crisis’). It is far more ambitious, and productive, to view big societal problems as a whole, than to construct moral hierarchies to prioritise one emergency over another.

The emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic has reinforced deep, structural inequalities within society – not only with respect to health, but in all manner of social life, including inequalities in access, affordability and quality of housing. At a time when many have been required to socially isolate, the crucial importance of safe and secure housing provision has been reinforced, alongside its connection with other rights, including health, work and education. Much of what ails society has a common epidemiology – inequality.

Persistent problems of housing supply, quality and affordability offer considerable challenges for housing policy, some 20 years following devolution in Scotland. Despite the expansion of rights for the homeless, private tenancy reform, and improvements to housing condition standards, there is still scope for the Scottish Government to have bolder ambitions for housing. Although there is much to applaud in the Scottish Government’s ‘Scotland’s 20 year vision for housing’ (such as promising to deliver 100,000 affordable homes over the next decade, advancing tenure-neutral housing quality standards, and instituting a ‘Rented Sector Strategy’ to address increasingly unaffordable rents), a third Sturgeon government (if the SNP 2021 manifesto is an indication) is likely to steady the course, incrementally, battling headwinds along the way as a marginal, minority government.

Influenced by the radicalism of the Greens, a more confident and progressive SNP could well be on course for delivering ‘a safe, warm, affordable home’ for everyone by 2040 by continuing their gradual, business-as-usual approach to policy change – but without institutional change, housing justice is likely to be partially, rather than universally, realised. Alternately, advancing a new social agenda based on a ‘right to housing’ could bring about the radical change necessary to fully guarantee universal access to high-quality, genuinely affordable housing. A right to housing has the potential to positively impact multiple domains of social life and can challenge significant disparities in material wellbeing and strengthen the foundations of a socially just and democratic society. Importantly, genuinely achieving such a right requires radical political, material and ideological change, away from the current neoliberal approach that sees housing as an asset (placing a premium on exchange rather than use value), and instead towards ambitious policies that cement redistribution and equality.

Locating a right to housing within a human rights framework moves the debate beyond means-testing and distinctions between so-called ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ groups (on which many welfare systems are premised), and instead focuses on a universal entitlement to an acceptable standard of living. For example, a housebuilding programme on the same scale as the expansion of social housing seen in Scotland in the 1960s and 1970s (some 30,000 to 40,000 homes per year), alongside a programme to buy back housing lost through the Right-to-Buy, would be consistent with such a right to housing framework. To put these figures in context, the SNP have delivered just over 4,000 homes for social rent per year, since being in control of Scottish Government from 2007.

The human right to housing is not merely a right to shelter, but more broadly, the right to live in security, peace and dignity. It is promising that both the SNP and the Greens advocate a right to housing in their respective political manifestos – albeit both limited to the context of homelessness. As the two pro-independence parties holding the majority of seats in Scottish Parliament, the SNP and Greens view constitutional change as a vehicle for delivering a more ambitious, progressive political agenda – but for now it would appear that a second referendum is on the backburner, as the country limps towards post-pandemic recovery. We should not have to wait for a second independence referendum, to introduce a right to housing – there is no better time than the present to end the housing crisis.

Dr Regina Serpa is a Research Fellow in Housing at the University of Stirling. The article is adapted from Serpa, R., Gray, N., and Saunders, E. (2022) ‘Towards a right to housing in Scotland’ in Gall, G. (ed.) ‘The Wealth of a Nation: Ensuring Economic and Social Solutions for a Fairer Scotland’ (Pluto).
Making work work for all

Jane Carolan lays out an alternative approach to that offered by the SNP Scottish Government

In the election, employment rights were on the Scottish political agenda. Several party manifestos maintained the policy of Scotland as a country of ‘Fair Work’ and made promises on how that Fair Work agenda could be maintained or even reinforced. ‘Fair Work’ through the previous Scottish Government’s ‘Fair Work Action Plan’ (FWAP) says it is about ‘focusing on encouraging and supporting employers’ to foster diversity, security of pay, and skills development and having an effective voice in the workplace’. However, the pandemic exposed a deeper reality in the working life for many Scots, bringing food bank use and private sector evictions centre stage, and highlighting the predicament of the ‘working poor’. Why in 2021 is a wage not sufficient to provide for living costs?

One statistic from the recent ‘Fair Work’ plan starts to answer this. Some 64% of the workforce in Scotland is in insecure employment, meaning 36% are in insecure conditions, usually classed as ‘precarious work’. It combines low level of certainty over job continuity, poor control over working hours, a low level of protection (against unemployment or discrimination), and little opportunity for training and career progression. Such workers are classed as casual, agency or seasonal like those on zero-hour contracts, or ‘gig’ workers.

The emergence of the ‘gig’ economy undermines this regulatory framework and strips employment of any meaningful legal protections as well as legal obligations such as national insurance and pension contributions, the minimum wage, paid breaks and paid holidays. So-called ‘independent contractors’ enter into a formal agreement to provide services to a company’s client. It is sold on the basis of ‘being your own boss’, making your own hours and income. In reality the work situation is dominated by apps and algorithms dictating every move. It was a service agreement excluding drivers from the status of being ‘workers’ under UK law that are being slowly but successfully legally challenged by the likes of couriers and drivers.

It is at the extremes of working conditions that the lack of protection for Scottish workers is seen at its most obvious and where ‘Fair Work’ limitations are exposed. ‘Fair work’ is voluntary, relying on collaboration, engagement and partnership, operating through the ‘good’ employer. The Fair Work Convention provides advice but not comprehensive standards and no effective means by which standards can be monitored or enforced. The FWAP monitors a range of statistical labour market indicators but what it cannot demonstrate is that any changes recorded for better or worse are in any way linked to its own work.

The case for workers’ rights cannot depend on the wishes of employers. Scotland remains the part of the ‘most lightly regulated labour market of any leading economy in the world” as Blair stated. From Thatcherism onwards, legislation has consistently diminished workers’ rights and the role of unions. The prerogative for legislative changes remains at Westminster until the constitutional settlement changes. However, these legislative constraints should not prevent the Scottish Government testing the limits of the possible.

There is an alternative. Workers’ rights and union rights are fundamental human rights enshrined in charters and treaties in international law which Britain has chosen to ignore but which remain the responsibility of governments. Based on that international law, ‘The Charter for Workers’ Rights Scotland’ makes the arguments for an approach based on the recognition of workers’ rights, encompassing employment status, working time, the living wage, pay equality, measures to ensure gender, race and disability equalities, health and safety and wage protection. Such individual rights need to be balanced by the reassertion of collective rights - to recruit without anti-union discrimination, to organise with access to workplaces and facilities, to have rights of union recognition, and to take industrial action. Unions are democratic organisations that exist to defend the rights of members and need to have the ability to organise freely.

Enumerating rights is not the sole aim of the Charter for it recognises the need for a coercive element that ensures that employers comply. Creating effective enforcement machinery has to start at the heart of government with a strong voice at the cabinet table with an individual responsible for industrial relations to develop coordinate and implement a radical vision. Specifically, the cabinet secretary for labour would collaborate with unions and employers to establish a register of employers committed to the Charter and a robust machinery for reporting and monitoring compliance by these employers. These processes should be mandatory in public procurement and licensing decisions, where legally possible having regard to the extent to which prospective contractors are registered and after due diligence found to comply with the provisions of the charter, a provision to be extended to all public authorities and public bodies.

In addition, the Scottish Government must commit to a timetabled rolling programme of sectoral collective bargaining in order to have agreed terms and conditions for all workers concerned across an entire industry. Sectoral collective bargaining does not remove the need for minimum standards set down in legislation but builds upon these statutory standards and ensures that minimum rights do not become the maximum. Across sectors such as social care, hospitality, construction and early learning, such bargaining, common throughout Europe, can raise wages and begin to enhance worker protection.

For more on the work of the Institute of Employment Rights in Scotland, see https://www.ier.org.uk/projects/charter-of-workers-rights-for-scotland/

Jane Carolan has coordinated the work of IER Scotland on which this piece is based. See ‘Scottish Charter of Workers Rights’ @ https://strathprints.strath.ac.uk/67615/

IER

Institute of Employment Rights
Transport is rarely a key factor in national elections in the UK. One has to go back to 1964 – when the Beeching programme of rail cuts was only just getting underway – to find a campaign in which transport was a major source of controversy. And so, the 2021 Scottish Parliament election was no exception, despite transport now being by far the biggest contributor to climate change of all sectors of Scotland’s economy. Not only is our car-centric culture fuelling climate change, air pollution, and the sedentary lifestyles (which contribute to obesity and diabetes epidemics) but the increase in car use over the post-war period has also been a key driver of inequality.

All five main parties flagged up transport problems and opportunities in their manifestos, but there were inconsistencies and omissions almost everywhere. Yes, all were in favour of more provision for ‘active travel’ – the over-used umbrella term which blurs some important differences between the needs of walking and cycling – but in less ‘cuddly’ areas, where hard choices are needed, there was a marked reluctance to make any commitments. Cutting back on road-building and introducing demand management (congestion charging etc) were virtually no-go areas – except in the case of the Greens.

But might the new parliamentary arithmetic lead to delivery of some of the radical changes which are needed to move Scotland towards a fairer, safer and more sustainable transport system? The prospects are mixed.

The Greens can point to their holding the balance of power for the SNP resulting in a number of transport successes in the last parliament: increased investment in cycling and walking, creation of a Local Rail Development Fund, and free bus travel for under-22s. But none of these wins were in ‘difficult’ - and fundamental - areas, like switching investment from unsustainable trunk road building to the long-neglected rail routes north of the Central Belt. And without demand management – strongly supported by the Greens, but studiously avoided by the SNP – there is, as noted by the sustainable transport alliance Transform Scotland, ‘absolutely zero chance’ of hitting the SNP’s target of a 20% reduction in road traffic by 2030.

Strangely, the Green manifesto said nothing specific about rail electrification. The SNP was already committed to electrifying all the inter-city routes by 2035, but this will mean stop-gap provision of expensive ‘bi-mode’ trains after the diesel ‘High Speed Trains’ become life-expired in 2030. Might the Greens press for the latter date as a new target for electrification?

Bus users and pedestrians have long been the ‘Cinderellas’ of transport policy delivery. Yet, 28% of Scottish households do not have regular access to a car. In Edinburgh, it’s 41%; and in Glasgow the figure is as high as 47% (and nearly a third of households, being distant from rail or subway, are entirely dependent on privatised and deregulated bus services).

Re-regulation of local bus services on the continental (and London) model – with franchised operations controlled by local authorities or their agencies – has to be at the heart of rebuilding the bus network post-Covid. But the Greens made no reference to re-regulation in their Holyrood manifesto, and the SNP – past beneficiaries of donations from the Stagecoach boss, Sir Brian Souter – have shown little appetite for upsetting that part of the apple cart.

The framework for delivery of transport is crucial to change. Most transport is local or regional, but the regional councils (with their strategic transport and land use planning powers) were scrapped by the Tories in 1996, and the SNP’s period in power has been characterised by emasculation of local authorities and centralisation of decision-making. Could the Greens win an enhancement of the powers and funding of the seven statutory Regional Transport Partnerships? These were established in 2005 to strengthen the planning and delivery of regional transport, but were later drastically reined in by the SNP such that they have spent much of their subsequent history desperately seeking European Union project funds to justify their ongoing existence.

Too often neglected is the importance of reducing the need for physical transport. But improving digital connectivity was flagged up in the SNP manifesto and could link to longer-term land use planning to render motorised transport less necessary. And in the short term there is plenty of scope to create ‘20-minute neighbourhoods’ through traffic reduction and re-allocating street space to make walking and cycling easier, safer and more enjoyable.

Perhaps, the most symbolic example of the ongoing Scottish Government bias towards investment in unsustainable transport infrastructure is on the Perth-Inverness corridor. The Highland Main Line (HML) railway is still two-thirds single-track, but public funding is being devoted overwhelmingly to dualling the parallel A9 at a likely ultimate cost of £5,000 million. Yet back in 2008 the Scottish Government’s ‘Strategic Transport Projects Review’ identified upgrading the HML as the third-top priority among 29 road and rail schemes across Scotland. Funding of up to £450m was envisaged – but to date the rail investment has been just £59m, and a significant upgrade has been kicked into the long grass (yet again), to post-2025.

A pessimist would conclude, in the light of long experience, that politicians generally prefer to skim the surface when it comes to transport. They’re unwilling to face up to some hard choices between, on the one hand, consumerism and individual mobility, and on the other hand, equity and the wider public good. But, for an optimist, the Greens engineering a substantial switch of A9 funding to the HML would signify that a fundamental change of transport policy direction was taking shape, at long last.

David Spaven is a sustainable transport consultant and railway author. He is co-author along with Ellie Harrison and Caitlin Doyle Cattrell of the chapter on transport and infrastructure in Gall, G. (2022) [ed.] ‘The Wealth of a Nation: Ensuring Economic and Social Solutions for a Fairer Scotland’ (Pluto).
Chimera of consensus on radical recovery from COVID? Or grounds for optimism?

Mike Danson eyes the prospect of cross-party cooperation for a boldly ‘building back better’

As I wrote in *Scottish Left Review* (Jan/Feb 2021), there is a remarkable degree of consensus across Scotland, its Scottish Government Commissions, STUC, Commonweal, Business for Scotland, the Wellbeing Alliance, think tanks and visionaries as to how we should be planning for the recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic. I argued there that a better, greener, fairer Scotland is envisaged by many and possible if we collectively don’t waste this opportunity. Rather than ‘build back better’ in conventional terms, we need to adopt the genuinely radical set of proposals being offered.

During the election campaign, a number of organisations across the political spectrum and ‘third sector’ interests collated manifesto commitments under their own respective sets of criteria and confirmed a good deal of congruence across the SNP, Labour and Greens. These bodies also identified where there were gaps, challenges and barriers to fulfilling the progress of policies towards implementation. Alongside these analyses, a reading of the manifestos and the media appearances of the main parties, apart from one, and of their leaders, apart from one, again has shown a high degree of similarity in identifying priorities and offering policy solutions.

Leaving aside the constitutional question, the consensus was evident on land reform, fair work, localism and foundational economies, just transition, reskilling education and training young people, housing and social care, piloting universal basic income/minimum income guarantee, reducing child poverty are common themes. Again, however, that other party was fixated on ‘independence’ and yet simultaneously building dependence of families, communities and the nation on Westminster and its neo-liberal agenda. Away from the sideshows, therefore, overwhelmingly the circus seems fairly settled on what are the priorities for building the Scotland we want it to be.

As we agreed on the Just Transition Commission, and as the latest paper from the Reid Foundation on education has analysed, words and policies are but the start: strategies and resources for implementation and empowerment are essential to fulfilling these promises and potentials. Whether in significantly reducing the disgraceful levels of child poverty, though these are less than elsewhere in the UK, or pursuing the fair work and public procurement agenda, for example, the context of the Conservative and increasingly alt-right Government in Westminster holding substantial reserved powers over taxes, regulations and expenditure areas must be recognised. Ameliorating some of the cuts to the real values of social security benefits and addressing the costs of Brexit have been important elements of the Scottish budget in recent times but these come at an opportunity cost, constraining investment and inclusion initiatives elsewhere.

Limitations on the Scottish Parliament to embrace its aspirations for a better Scotland include the failure of the Smith Commission to deliver powers over taxing savings and dividends wealth at higher rates which are important for redistributing from the mega-rich to the people and so to breaking up large estates for community benefit under land reform. Other constraints, for example, are the reserving of employment law, regulations over public procurement and renewable energy licences to the UK level meaning that key areas underpinning the Just Transition to a net zero economy require an unsympathetic and hostile Conservative Government to cooperate over fundamental changes to developing a green recovery. These powers are crucial to realising the STUC’s ‘The People’s Recovery’ and the plans described in the ‘Green Jobs Report’ and reflect their calls for employment law to be devolved. As the electorate in England deepens its support for Brexit, isolationism and implicitly a further strengthening of the centre/Executive over the rest of the country/Parliament, so the Scottish Parliament will have to demand the transfer of essential powers to delivering agreed, consensus strategies.

Devolution of such powers is highly likely to be given by the increasingly entrenched and emboldened Conservative regime in Westminster, if the Internal Market Act 2020 and other utterances is anything to go by. But promises of a future convention on federalism, devo-max and some other chimera, with the Tories continuing in power for this decade, means this will be an academic argument and a distraction for the priorities and strategies that the electorate in Scotland has voted for they will be unfulfilled and lost to the cost of the people, environment and economy.

However, even if a suite of powers were to be devolved, the unionist parties would not countenance the loss of ‘federal’ jurisdiction over defence – so Trident would remain, over immigration and border control – so the racist and anti-humanitarian philosophy and tactics played out on Kenmure Street on 13 May 2021 would continue, and the neo-liberal and imperial underpinnings of the City and economic policies would remain untouchable. These constitutional fault lines confirm that independence debates are about more than the economy, and union and community activism can be expected to come more to the fore in the months ahead on these other issues.

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Useful links:
- [https://www.stuc.org.uk/files/Policy/Research-papers/peoples-recovery-full.pdf](https://www.stuc.org.uk/files/Policy/Research-papers/peoples-recovery-full.pdf)
With ‘fire-and-re-hire’ raging, will BoJos’ Brexiteers get their way in trampling over workers’ rights?

Mick Rice considers a new way to skin this Tory tiger on work and employment

With Tory Brexiteers dreaming of turning Britain into a laissez faire paradise, the labour movement needs new strategies to defend worker rights. Already, uber Brexiteers are signaling that they wish to abolish the EU working time directive (notwithstanding that the UK had an opt-out). They want to undercut EU standards and still be able to export to EU countries! Of course, the EU Commission has made clear that such behaviour could result in the imposition of tariffs on British goods. But relying on EU bureaucrats - or even our own Labour MPs - to defend worker rights will not guarantee success. There are other ways of skinning this Tory cat and maintaining our rights. The British union movement must show solidarity with our EU sisters and brothers to defend labour standards. Moreover, we need to protect ourselves against British spiv employers.

Whilst legislation has played an increasing role in industrial relations, it is not its essential characteristic. Abolishing EU regulations does not automatically mean that individual contracts of employment will be amended. In the UK, legislation tends to provide minimum standards. Actual contracts of employment, that is, what workers actually get, are overwhelmingly determined by collective bargaining (or its absence). This means that unions negotiate an agreement with the employer which is then applied to all the workers in the bargaining unit. Quite often, such agreements will be used as benchmarks and applied to workers who are not directly involved. An example would be the voluntary sector as most workers in this sector ‘follow’ the local authority agreement.

So, here is an easy way to incorporate all EU worker regulations into UK contracts of employment. During the next round of wage negotiations get each and every union to demand that contacts of employment should contain the following: ‘Your terms and conditions of employment shall be no less favourable than those who are employed in comparable jobs within the European Union’. This clause can be referred to as the Comparable European Employment Clause (CEEC). In one fell swoop, all European workers’ rights (without any opt-outs) are included in every individual worker’s employment contract.

Contracts of employment are enforceable in the courts and providing you can show that comparable workers in the EU have better conditions then they also apply to you. In practice, applications to the courts, as a consequence of this provision, are likely to be collective applications submitted by a union.

Many decent employers will agree to this provision – partly because employers are often interested in a level playing field in case they are undercut by competitors. Furthermore, there is no immediate cost to the ‘bottom line’ as this is a commitment to protect conditions which are largely already applicable. But there could be many who would not agree to incorporate this clause in their staff contracts of employment. What can we do to make them see sense and behave as decent employers should?

I suggest making a note of all employers who do not agree to CEECs. In the subsequent round of negotiations seek ballot approval for 1 and 2-day per week strike action. Get all those workers who have secured the CEEC to contribute to a levy to support workers’ rights. Use the fund to provide full wage benefit to workers in targeted firms and call them out on strike. Who doesn’t want to be on strike when being paid full wages?

The Tory Westminster Government has realised that devolved administrations might introduce legislation to maintain EU regulations. For this reason, it introduced the UK Internal Markets Act 2020. However, whilst the UK Government may be able to control the legislative purview of devolved administrations, it cannot stymie the role of devolved administrations and, indeed, all public bodies, with regard to their own employer functions. This is easily understood when you think of governments having dual roles. Governments legislate to impose conditions on others but they also make decisions about their own affairs, i.e., they have a legislative role (imposing conditions on others) and a curatorial role (imposing conditions on themselves). So, devolved administrations and other public bodies could adopt the following resolution which would not contravene the UK Internal Markets Act:

This [insert name of public body] agrees that from [insert date] all directly employed staff and all staff employed by bodies that receive funding as a consequence of a budget approval by this [insert name of public body] shall, as a condition of receipt of such funding, have contained within their contract of employment the following: ‘Your terms and conditions of employment shall be no less favourable than those who are employed in comparable jobs within the European Union’. Further, all contractors providing goods and services to this [insert name of public body] and to any other bodies in receipt of funding as a consequence of a budget approval by this [insert name of public body] shall, as a condition of the contract to supply such goods and services, include a commitment that its staff shall enjoy conditions of employment no less favourable than comparable workers employed within the European Community.

If the Scottish and Welsh parliaments adopted CEEC resolutions, as well as the Northern Ireland Assembly, this would leave the Tory ‘English’ parliament exposed. For this strategy to become reality one prerequisite is needed: union leaders that have at least a little imagination. After a lifetime campaigning in the union movement, I am not holding my breath.

Mick Rice was a research officer for the AUEW engineering union. He is now the secretary of the UNITE Retired Members branch in Glasgow.
Breaching the ministerial codes: Not just a Scottish special concern

Jonathan Deans casts an eye down south to survey a climate of political unaccountability

For many months, Scottish politics was engrossed with the inquiry into the Scottish Government’s handling of sexual harassment and misconduct allegations against Salmond. The connected Hamilton inquiry also investigated whether Sturgeon had breached the Scottish Ministerial Code by knowingly misleading Parliament as to when she was first aware of the allegations. If she did so, then she would be expected to resign. The Hamilton inquiry concluded Sturgeon did not breach the ministerial code, and that while Parliament was misled, she did not do this knowingly or purposively.

Members of the current Conservative Government, however, have escaped calls to resign and media scrutiny over comparable and arguably worse acts while holding public office. Priti Patel, Home Secretary, was found by an inquiry to have breached the Ministerial Code by bullying staff. Matt Hancock, Health Secretary, acted unlawfully by failing to publish contracts for PPE during the coronavirus pandemic. Robert Jenrick, Housing Secretary, unlawfully approved a housing development sought by a Tory donor.

In February 2020, Philip Rutnam, the most senior civil servant in the Home Office, resigned, accusing Patel of a ‘vicious’ campaign of bullying against him. It then transpired she had faced bullying complaints from staff in 2015, when she was Employment Minister; in 2017, when she was Secretary of State for International Development; and in 2020 from multiple staff members in the Home Office.

A Cabinet Office inquiry concluded in November 2020 that Patel had breached the ministerial code by failing to treat civil servants with consideration and respect during her time in all three departments. However, the PM rejected the inquiry’s findings and refused to take any action, causing Alex Allan, the Prime Minister’s chief advisor on the Ministerial Code, to resign in protest.

In March 2021, the Government paid Rutnam £370,000 (plus legal costs) from taxpayers to settle his employment tribunal claim without Patel’s conduct being called into question in a public tribunal. It was also revealed that a similar claim against Patel was settled back in 2015, to the sum of £25,000. So far, Patel’s actions as a bullying leader have cost taxpayers £395,000 (plus legal costs on both sides), along with the cost of investigating her behaviour.

In February 2021, the High Court in England ruled Hancock breached his legal obligation to publish ‘Contract Award Notices’ within 30 days of contracts for PPE being awarded to private companies. This is a legal requirement detailed in the Public Contracts Regulations 2015 and, as it applies to all public contracts entered by the Government, no competent Secretary would be ignorant of this requirement.

It is important to note that acting ‘unlawfully’ is not the same as acting ‘illegally’. Hancock did not commit a crime here, instead he, whether negligently or maliciously, failed to comply with regulations. However, Hancock could have fixed this error immediately by his department release the Contract Award Notices. Instead, as noted by the High Court Judge, he ordered that the legal case be defended fully in Court, causing £207,000 of taxpayer money to be spent on legal fees for a case which was unwinnable, as the obligation was clearly detailed in the regulations. Furthermore, the Good Law Project, the organisation which won the initial High Court case, has had to raise further court proceedings in March 2021, as Hancock’s department has continued to act unlawfully by heavily redacting the contracts that they have released. The public has a right to this information and Hancock’s department is breaching the law to prevent the contents of these contracts being disclosed.

Aside from the incredibly questionable use of the ‘Towns Fund’, where the Government distributed £3.6bn of funding across constituencies which were Tory targets in the 2019 election, Jenrick has also been involved in a more straightforward breach of ethics in public office. In May 2020, he overruled the Planning Inspectorate to approve a £1bn luxury housing development for Richard Desmond, a prominent Tory donor. The timing of the approval allowed Desmond to avoid a council-imposed infrastructure tax, which would have cost him £50m. A judicial review action was raised, which would have forced the Government to disclose documents between Jenrick’s department and Desmond. To avoid this, Jenrick conceded that he acted unlawfully and had shown ‘apparent bias’.

In June 2020, Labour used an opposition day debate to force the Government to disclose those communications. They showed that Desmond had lobbied Jenrick from November 2019, shown him a promotional video at a private fundraising dinner, and then exchanged texts and emails discussing how planning permission would be obtained. One of the emails showed that Jenrick had directly pressured members of his own staff to figure out the quickest way to overrule the Planning Inspectorate. At this time, Jenrick had not disclosed his own conflict of interest to his department.

So, ministers in Johnson’s government have breached the Ministerial Code, acted unlawfully, and acted where they had a clear conflict of interest. These ministers have not faced the same clamour for resignation as Sturgeon has in Scotland. This may be because the SNP was a minority administration while Tories have an 80 seat Westminster majority and the SNP Scottish Government was in the run up to facing the electorate in May this year, making this the ideal time for political point-scoring, while Johnson’s government will likely not be facing an election until 2024.

However, these matters are serious enough that they should not be seen as mere party-political issues. The opposition should be calling on these ministers to resign and the press should be placing the Government under more scrutiny. It should be remembered the opposition did manage to get Leon Brittan to resign in 1986 over the Westland Affair, and Nigel Lawson to resign in 1989, despite Thatcher’s Government having a majority of 102 seats, and the next election being far off in 1992.

Jonathan Deans is a newly qualified solicitor and Treasurer of Dennistoun Community Council. He is a registered member of Scottish Labour.
The Jerusalem Declaration on anti-Semitism

Chris Sutherland assesses a major advance for having a balanced definition of anti-Semitism

So many column inches have been written on the 2016 ‘International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance’ (IHRA) definition of anti-Semitism with 7 of its 11 accompanying examples proscribing criticism of the state of Israel. Across the media, including the liberal media (BBC, Guardian), it’s been portrayed as the ‘gold standard’ of defining and seeking out anti-Semitism and anti-Semites, with pressure to sign up to the IHRA on governments across the world, councils and ministries of state, corporations, mass media, colleges and universities. It was one of the weapons used against Corbyn and the Labour left and against supporters of Palestinian human rights and campaigners for ‘Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions’ (BDS). Boris Johnson now confidently states that he wants to ban BDS, with similar calls for bans in the US and EU, making non-violent civil resistance to Israeli policies illegal.

The ‘New Anti-Semitism’, as represented by the IHRA definition, claims a clear causal link between criticism of the state of Israel and anti-Semitism, with Israel seen as the ancestral home of world Jews and any attack on Israel translating to an attack on Jews. It supplanted ‘classical anti-Semitism’ with its traditional definition of ‘hatred of Jews as Jews’ which avoided conflating anti-Semitic racism with Zionism. Under ‘Classical anti-Semitism’, Zionism is used in its correct context, namely as a political and social movement towards a Jewish state for a Jewish people. This is now enshrined in the 2018 ‘Nation State Law’ in which only Jews have rights over self-determination and statehood in Israel.

Since then, there has been a procession of high-profile cases in which the IHRA has been invoked to attack prominent Palestinian activists, Corbyn being the chief target (and most prominent victim), with countless suspensions and expulsions on the Labour left (like Ken Livingstone, Chris Williamson, Marc Wadsworth and John Davies) and including prominent Jewish anti-racist campaigners like Jackie Walker, Tony Greenstein, Moshe Machover and Naomi Wimborne-Idrissi.

When veteran film-maker Ken Loach was invited to address his alma mater at St Peter’s College, Oxford, there was a concerted campaign to ban him for alleged ‘holocaust denial’, an outrageously smear against one of the most honourable figures on the anti-racist left. A similar campaign was recently directed against Shami Chakrabarti by the Campaign Against Anti-Semitism (CAA) to ban her from speaking at an International Women’s Day event at St Paul’s School in March 2021, again quoting the IHRA, describing her report on anti-Semitism in 2016 as a ‘joke of a report’, when it was anything but and well-preised at the time.

Attention has recently shifted back to the university campuses (where much of the pro- and anti-Zionist battles have been fought both in the US and the UK and increasingly now in the EU) with currently on-going attempts to get Professor David Miller sacked from his position at the University of Bristol. Miller has long been a thorn against corporate lobbying, including various studies detailing the intricacies of the Jewish lobby both in the UK and the EU. He was also one of the co-authors of the first critical analysis of the anti-Semitism campaign being waged against Labour in Bad News for Labour (Pluto, 2019) and a founding member of ‘Spinwatch’ which monitors corporate lobbying. In the 2010 general election, David Cameron, described lobbying as the next great scandal to be exposed following the expenses scandal. Miller would therefore be a prized scalp for the British establishment. A vigorous campaign has been launched to defend not just him as an individual but in defence of academic freedom as a whole.

In April 2020, Palestinian academic, Dr Ghada Karmi, lecturing at Exeter University on ‘conflict and peace-making’ was attacked by the Jewish Chronicle and CAA for an article in ‘Middle East Eye’ in which she stated that ‘terminating Zionism [was] the only way to permanent peace’. This is a view shared by most adherents of the ‘one-state solution’: based on the idea of a secular Palestine from the sea to the river Jordan in which Jews and Palestinians co-exist as citizens with equal rights. The CAA unsuccessfully attempted to whip up a campaign to have her sacked. Karmi was a child victim and eyewitness to the 1948 Nakba. She was forced to flee her Jerusalem home along with her family recounted in her autobiography ‘In Search of Fatima’. Today, she reaches out to both communities but this did not stop the CAA branding her an anti-Semite and attempt to destroy her reputation and career.

There were plenty of warnings about the effect the IHRA would have on free speech and how the conflation of anti-Zionism with anti-Semitism would impact on the ability to speak out against Israeli policies towards Palestinians in the Occupied West Bank and the blockaded Gaza strip, as well as discrimination against non-Jews within Israel itself. As a consequence, there is now very little reporting by mainstream media about the on-going, active settler colonialism in the Occupied Territories nor the death of the two-state solution by illegal Israeli settlements and military occupation. The IHRA was as it was intended, a weapon to shut people up. But now the ground is shifting and people are speaking up.

In December 2019 one of the original drafters of the IHRA, Kenneth Stern, a lecturer on anti-Semitism hate studies with the American Jewish Committee, has publicly criticised his own definition: ‘It was created primarily so that European data collectors could know what to include and exclude. That was anti-Semitism could be monitored better over time and across borders. It was never intended to be a campus hate speech code … this order [by Donald Trump] is an attack on academic freedom and free speech.’ A year later 122 Palestinian academics from across the world published letter in the Guardian (29 November 2020) insisting on their rights to free speech and the right to frame the settler colonial analysis based on their own real experiences, historical evidence and national identity subject to the normal peer-group scrutiny.

In January 2021, the Israeli human rights monitor, B’tselem, dropped a bombshell by publishing its report, A Regime of Jewish Supremacy, in which it described the illegal occupation of the West Bank, the Gaza Blockade and discrimination against Arabs as a form of ‘apartheid’ covering the entire geographic area of...
Palestine: ‘two separate regimes operate side by side, separated by the Green Line’.

The Guardian, one of the early proponents of the IHRA, suddenly got the jitters. In an editorial of 17 January 2021, it grudgingly conceding that ‘Israel has a problem of historic discrimination’ begging ‘B’tselem’s heretical question: what if there is only, in reality, one regime between the River Jordan and the Mediterranean Sea, rather than one political power that controls a territory in which there are two distinct regimes?’

All of a sudden one of the examples in the IHRA making it anti-Semitic to describe Israel as a ‘racist endeavour’ was shattered by its own human rights monitor. The report covered immigration and citizenship, population control, civil and military law, expulsions, administrative detentions, pseudo-civil administration, denial of freedom of movement, house demolitions and land confiscations, permits and check-points, political and civil exclusion, deliberate policies of under-development in Palestinian areas, land and water apartheid, building restrictions, the construction of Jewish only roads, the continued expansion and building of illegal settlements, separation walls across the West Bank, and settler violence. These all move towards the constriction and control of Palestinian living space into smaller and smaller areas.

Israeli hegemony took another blow when the International Criminal Court (ICC) announced that it had jurisdiction to investigate Israeli war crimes in Gaza and the occupied territories from June 2014, specifically to look at atrocities against civilians in the invasion of Gaza in 2014, the shooting of unarmed Palestinians in the Great March of Return in 2018-19 and the illegal settlements in the West Bank.

In February 2021, 62 UK academics signed a letter condemning the attempt by Education Secretary, Gavin Williamson, to force universities into adopting the IHRA or face losing funding and blamed the IHRA for having ‘a chilling effect on academic freedom’. Then on 25 March 2021, a direct challenge to the IHRA monolith was made with the announcement of the ‘Jerusalem Declaration on Anti-Semitism’ (JDA) – signed by 200 global academics, Jewish as well as Palestinians. This is a brand, new international definition designed to replace the IHRA which moves back towards a more classical definition of anti-Semitism, but which places it firmly within the context of post-IHRA experiences of suppression of free speech and producing the kind of witch-hunt where committed anti-racists suddenly became the racists, where innocent people became subject to denunciation without evidence and even the act of denial seen as proof of guilt. Here at last is a workable definition: ‘Anti-Semitism is discrimination, prejudice, hostility or violence against Jews as (or Jewish institutions as) Jewish.’ It comes in three parts:

Part A: General categories 1-5: cover character traits and negative generalisations but importantly states that ‘what is true of racism in general is true of anti-Semitism in particular’ – in other words that racism has universal qualities and does not involve a hierarchy of racism. The five guidelines cover tropes, conspiracy theories, anti-Semitic acts, holocaust denial, direct and indirect anti-Semitism, anti-Semitism in words, visual images and deeds, coded statements, concepts of evil, meanness.

Part B: Israel and Palestine 6-10 – examples that, on the face of it, are anti-Semitic.

Part C: Israel and Palestine 11-15 – examples that, on the face of it, are not anti-Semitic.

Part C is a major departure from the IHRA in that it allows for support for Palestinian demands for justice and the full granting of political, national, and civil human rights as encapsulated in international law; it allows for criticizing or opposing Zionism or arguing for full equality whether in two-states, a bi-national state, unitary democratic state, federal, or in whatever form; it also allows for evidence-based criticism of Israel that ‘even if contentious, it is not anti-Semitic, in and of itself, to compare Israel with other historical cases, including settler-colonialism or apartheid’. In another major departure from the IHRA, it recognises the role of non-violent forms of political protest including BDS and other forms of non-violent civil opposition.

Finally, and crucially, it enshrines the principle of free speech as protected by Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights which assert that ‘Political speech does not have to be measured, proportional, tempered, or reasonable to be protected ... Criticism that some may see as excessive or contentious, or as reflecting a ‘double standard’ is not, in and of itself, anti-Semitic.’

The ink on the Jerusalem Declaration on anti-Semitism (JDA) is barely dry and it remains to be seen whether it gets the same kind of ‘gold standard’ treatment the IHRA received from the bulk of the British political and media establishment. It still has its critics. Palestinians boldly state that they don’t need permission to assert their national and political rights, but already the parameters under JDA have suddenly widened, and so discussion and debate has been liberated (to a degree). Suddenly people are free to speak without fear of a witch-hunt and that there is freedom to disagree. There is context within international law guaranteeing freedom of expression (including Zionist views) – Rowan Atkinson, in his famous ‘feel free to insult me’ speech of August 2018 asserting his right ‘to be offended’. The JDA to me represents an historic opportunity to roll back the IHRA and start the debate afresh. So, let’s get talking.

Chris Sutherland is a lifelong socialist, living in St. Andrews, a member of the Palestinian Solidarity Campaign but not of any political party.
Poetry page – plenty to please

The 80s
David McKinstry

The Keegan perm gave way to the mullet
And CD replaced LP,
Whilst Essex boys whistled
‘Maggie’s the girl for me’.

Unemployment was rising
Whilst the Belgrano was sinking,
We were told to consume
Without conscience or thinking.

The nation watched
Royal wedding at St. Paul’s,
Whilst we prayed in our new
Cathedrals of shopping malls.

We were told to ‘Tell Sid’
To buy his gas shares,
But something was smelling
More than the industry
They were selling.

We rocked at Live Aid
Whilst gravestones told us,
‘Don’t die of Ignorance’
Of our own Aids.

The eighties, a decade
Of decadence and dole,
Hoodwinked by market forces
As we sold our national soul.

Levellers
James Aitchison

My parents were levellers: they’d been
levelled down
To a two-room shell in the poorest part of
town.
Slums segregate the proletarian mass
From decent people of a better class.

My literate father worked twelve hours a day
To earn the least the ironmasters would pay.
And while my father worked all day to earn
Five pounds a week, I began to learn
The dignity of the levellers’ creed:
Freedom from the slum mentality and from
greed
And the self-righteousness of overlords.
My father read and taught me respect for
words.

I loathe the money-laundering gangsters who
stole the banks.
The slums are far away.
I still give thanks
To my dead parents for that.
I’m old and ill and it’s late
My levelling disposition’s a steady state
And now so innate
I don’t even have to try.
When I stop levelling is the day I die.

Showing a way
David Betteridge

‘We are witnessing an eruption not of lava
but of labour ... the labour of working men
and women ...’

Jimmy Reid, Glasgow Green, 18 August 1971

Once upon a time – here,
in the real world, for this is not a fairy tale –
a bold idea changed / to That.
Imagine, acted on by many,
took on the force of hard material fact.
This happened forty years ago;
the place, the shipyards of the Upper Clyde.
The wonder is, given the world’s wounds since,
the bold idea has not yet died.

All rivers have their storied past,
in part the same, in part unique.
More than a few have known the pride
of ships well made and safely launched;
and also known, when fortunes ebb,
a shadow-side. But here, at UCS,
a Labour victory was ours;
and Capital, out-classed, endured reversal,
and a loosening of its powers.

The reason is not hard to seek:
big on any scale, a volcano, not of lava
but of Labour, burst in flame.
The action
that eight thousand shipyard workers took
filled the bright skies of politics. Briefly,
social order’s deep assumptions shook.
That is the core of Clyde’s especial claim.

Lame duck, said Capital, dismissive
and devaluing of the yards.
Never mind the lives invested there,
the teeming skills, the order book!
Never mind the hinterland they served,
that equally in turn served them!

Dead duck was what it wished to see,
little knowing that our bird would fly,
and soar, deriving strength from thousands,
then from tens of thousands more.

Unite and fight! In tandem, and in full,
heeding the maxim’s dual elements,
not from the hole outwith the shipyards’
gates,
but working from within: there
lay the workers’ stratagem,
that helped us win.

The shipyards’ mail bag,
like a farmer’s sack of seed, spilled out
its daily bulge of contents: news received
of rallies, demonstrations, strikes;
well-wishers’ words, and sometimes flowers;
and cash, from corner shops, from churches,
children, unions, and the whole wide
listening world,
sums both large and widows’ generous mites
— sent in comradeship, to keep
the struggle’s fire alight.

The yards were saved: the bold idea,
in act, had proved its worth.
But now, four decades on, what’s left?
In place of gain, a creeping dearth.
Not only ships have sunk, or gone for scrap,
but yards as well, and jobs, and skills,
and with them, hope. Along the river,
as throughout the land, and world,
we feel a cutting wind that kills.
Economic winter has us in its grip.

For Capital, the battle that it lost in ‘71
was clarion-call and school;
it learned far more than we.

It learned to hone its tools of shock,
displace, lay off, and rule.
Ganging up and doing down,
it made too many of us settle, first for slices
of the loaf we made, then beggars’ crusts,
then bigger all. Ruthlessly,
it grabbed again its habitual crown.

For us, a tragedy ensued,
its playing-out still under way:
comrades at loggerheads and each others’
throats;
lost sense of purpose and of common cause,
confusion and the side-track having won the
day;
unions and parties pulled apart, offering
least,
not best resistance in a losing war.
What should – what could – we have
attempted otherwise, or more?

Can we combine to build afresh that bold
idea
that found expression and a home at UCS?
Can we re-launch it on the carrying stream
of people’s wants and dearest dreams?
Can we extend it to the point it captures
greater powers, and thus rebuts,
with allies everywhere,
the might that Capital will bring to bear?

The world shifts restlessly; a rising flood
of tremors agitates beneath; fresh rifts
in what we thought was solid mass appear.
Deep energy demands release.
Eruptions can’t be far: the forecast’s clear.

Present struggle cries to know
the complex story of its past. Take it!
Save it from erasure, or revision’s grasp!
What happened here in ’71
can be no Terra nullius of the mind, open
for errors to invade. It’s where,
ablaze and wise, we entered history,
and showed a way whereby a future
might be made.

David Betteridge is the editor of a
compilation of poems, songs, prose memoirs,
photographs and cartoons celebrating the
1971-2 UCS work-in called ‘A Rose Loupt Oot’
(Smokestack Books, 2011).
Steve McQueen, director, Small Axe: Mangrove (2020)
Reviewed by Jackie Bergson

Artistry and realism synergise perfectly within screenwriter and director, Steve McQueen’s, body of work, much of which includes historical drama films which have been inspired by real people and events. This is also true of his recently released Small Axe anthology of five films; each of which focuses upon a different story about black British people and their communities; all of which reflect cultural and political realities between the late 1960s and the mid-1980s.

The first in the series is Mangrove which depicts events surrounding the infamous trial of the Mangrove Nine at London’s Old Bailey in 1970. Popular press at the time created the designation ‘The Mangrove Nine’ to classify nine black British men and women who were arrested and tried under charges of inciting a riot at a protest against police. One of the nine, Frank Crichlow (Shaun Parkes) owned The Mangrove restaurant, a ‘hip place to be’ according to McQueen. It was a place to which local activists and intellectuals along with internationally famous musicians and artists gravitated having opened in 1968 within an increasingly culturally diverse part of London’s Notting Hill.

McQueen has emphasised in interviews that the Caribbean restaurant represented a sense of belonging and a stake in British culture to Crichlow, his family, his friends and his customers. The film director also reminds us that Mangrove relates to a particular era within which Enoch Powell publicly delivered what became known as his ‘Rivers of Blood’ speech, in 1968. Ted Heath consequently sacked Powell for making inflammatory remarks which amplified racial hatred but not before white supremacist sympathisers empowered the Conservatives towards victory in 1970.

Outstanding performances by the film’s actors include that of Sam Spruell, who plays Frank Pulley, a police officer who instigated and enacted relentless raids and violence against Crichlow and his friends, amongst whom were activist and broadcaster, Darcus Howe, (Malachi Kirby) and the female leader of the British Black Panthers, Altheia Jones-LeCointe (Letitia Wright). In a recent interview, Spruell shared the point that following the trial of the Mangrove Nine, a popular newspaper at the time carried the headline that Pulley was ‘the worst police constable in Britain’. Pulley and his colleagues’ actions in the film reflect the fact that they were driven by their own racist assumptions, in seeking to criminalise their targets. Spruell leads these action scenes with unsympathetic realism and with no holds barred, largely thanks to McQueen’s directing style. We, thus, understand that Pulley and his colleagues revelled in their own prejudices, racism and brutality, both within the film and in historical reality.

Through tracking unfolding events which saw criminal charges which were eventually brought against the Mangrove Nine by Pulley and his colleagues, anger on both sides is exposed. Thus, truthful reflections and portrayals take precedence over bias in this as much as in any of McQueen’s remarkable films. Emphasis, however, is again upon throwing clear light upon institutionalised racism which was successfully challenged, if not adequately punished.

Renowned Scottish QC Ian MacDonald (Jack Lowden) provided legal counsel and representation for a number of the Nine who were not representing themselves at the trial. He fought for changes to the decision to deploy an all-white jury against the black defendants and won: two black British jurors were consequently included. MacDonald would later state in a legal journal: ‘The Mangrove Nine trial was a watershed because we learnt through experience how to confront the power of the court, because the defendants refused to play the role of ‘victim’.

McQueen stated in a recent interview that he wanted to make the Small Axe anthology of films as a means of both preserving and throwing light upon important social and political events which took place within his parents’ communities. His voice clearly speaks for generations of his ancestors who were oppressed, brutalised and effectively silenced. Yet, his films transcend politics through taking us through the feelings, the joyousness, the tragedy, the pain and the humane resilience of those real lives he has chosen to depict. Juxtaposing lively, life-affirming images with moments which either shock or appear suspended in time, every second of his films is truly captivating. Described by some of his cast and crew as being ‘a magician with a camera’, the depth of cultural learning experienced through McQueen’s films is genuinely extraordinary, both inside and outside of his filmmaking process. His creations are an honour and a treasure to behold.

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

In Britain, collusion between Classics and class is portrayed in terms of a privileged few brandishing their acquaintance with Greek and Latin as an emblem of their place at the top of a hierarchical society. Hall and Stead, well aware of this and its material basis in family affluence and private schools, tread a path-breaking course by opening up a new approach: the unplumbed role of classics in working-class culture.

The first of their book’s four parts covers the emergence of Classics as a discipline and the challenges to its elitist status from readers, poets and visual media. Part II looks at the ways communities mounted their challenges to ruling-class hegemony over the classics. The chapter on Scotland points to the country’s egalitarian tradition which saw a huge number of unofficial ‘adventure schools’, not unlike the ‘Irish hedge schools, develop in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It was in one of these, in Alloway, that Robert Burns studied Latin, nurturing his future renown as a cultured Scot able to contest the destiny that his status as a labourer made seem inevitable.

The Scotland chapter examines four particular aspects of the way ancient Greece and Rome were experienced by the Scottish working class: the bursaries that provided educational opportunities for boys in Aberdeen and the north-east; the publishing ventures of George Millar in Dundee and the Peebles-born Chambers brothers; the use Thomas Carlyle made of classical myth in his denunciation of capitalism; and the novel *Spartacus* by Lewis Grassic Gibbon.

Part III, ‘Underdogs, underclasses, underworlds’, brings to light extraordinary working-class individuals (‘ragged-trousered philologists’) whose love of classical learning never earned them recognition and for whom adversity became their environment. They include Andrew Donaldson, born in the Fife village of Auchertool, whose poverty and eccentricities prevented him making a success of his accomplishments as a classicist. Fluent in ancient Greek, William Wilkie, the ‘Scottish Homer’, composed a nine-book epic about Thebes while ploughing his fields to plant potatoes. Glaswegian James Moor was able to achieve academic success, becoming a Professor of Greek at Glasgow University, but his proletarian habits alienated colleagues: living with his working-class wife in a poor quarter of the city and frequenting taverns, he died insolvent.

Equally absorbing material in this part of the book unearths more that will be new to most readers, looking at how Greek was used in various recherché contexts, from sex manuals to shopkeping. A chapter traces the ways performers of the human body, the likes of strongmen, strongwomen, dancers, actresses, contortionists – invariably working-class – referenced the classical world to authorise and widen their appeal.

The book’s final part brings to the fore the importance of classical material in the experience of work for the labouring classes. Wanlockhead in Dumfries and Galloway is given due recognition for its Miners’ Library founded in 1756 and the village school where children had access to a classical education. Other chapters cover trade union banner art and the work of communist theatre practitioners in the 1930s.

*A People’s History of Classics* is a trailblazer, opening up to view a fertile landscape that has for long been obscured by clouds of class partiality. Each of its twenty-five and fully referenced chapters acts as a signpost to byways that are full of surprises and lessons to be learnt. 

I grew up in Scotland in the 1950s and 1960s not far from the Rosyth naval base. Awareness of the danger of nuclear war between the superpowers led me to CND and some token activism. I recollect when in 1962, I acquired a pot of emulsion and a brush. In the middle of the night, I sneaked out and painted ‘No Polaris’ in huge letters on the pavement of Kirkcaldy High School. That was my contribution to the struggle. 50 years later I witnessed an SNP government committed to the removal of nuclear weapons from Scotland. Correspondence in the *Herald* and other Scottish papers recently has brought that policy into question. The SNP has already endorsed NATO but is now being urged to accept Faslane as a base for submarines with nuclear weapons. A proponent of this is Trevor Royle.

He is very knowledgeable about the history of the development of the Cold War. For me, this was part of the fascination of the book. Equally fascinating were the anecdotes. I had never heard of the marine, Andrew Conron, of Bathgate. After being taken prisoner, he decided to stay in The People’s Republic of China and contribute to the construction of socialism. He learned Chinese, and worked as a translator. Other anecdotes include a mention that the much-vaunted V-bombers had no provision for the crew to bail out and did not have sufficient fuel to return to Britain after

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Trevor Royle, *Facing the Bear: Scotland and the Cold War*, Birlinn, 2019, £25, pp368, 9781780275260
Reviewed by Hamish Kirk
delivering their deadly cargo.

Nor had I heard of ‘The Laird’s Lug’ in Edinburgh Castle. This is a medieval listening device built into the Great Hall. It enabled a listener above the hall to listen on to conversations. When Gorbachev was invited to speak there, his minders became aware of this and asked for it to be bricked up. I was not aware of the role of my alma mater, Edinburgh University, in providing platforms for discussion on Strategic Studies between East and West.

Royle is clearly an insider. It seems evident that he played some role in the intelligence and defence apparatus. I still have my unilateralist opinions, reinforced by the possibility of Scotland leaving Britain. That possibility still poses the question, ‘What is to be done with Faslane?’

I am prepared to continue a dialogue on that question although for me ridding us of these nuclear weapons is still on the agenda. So too is an end to the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Libya and Yemen. Foreign affairs and defence do not get much exposure in the political sphere - in Scotland or in the wider UK. Can we take steps to put them up there for discussion again? As part of that, I have invited Trevor to come and talk to us in Rothesay on these matters.

Hamish Kirk is a retired teacher, linguist and translator living on the Isle of Bute.

Alex Ross,
Wagnerism: Art and Politics in the Shadow of Music, 4th Estate,
2020, £30, pp769, 9780007319053
Reviewed by Graeme Arnott

Readers will be more than familiar with the whole panoply of political ‘-isms’ that range from those of collective struggle to those named after specific individuals. The same is rarely true for artists, or more specifically, musicians. So, whilst we have Leninism there is no such thing as Lennon-ism; Stalinism but not Shostakovich-ism, Trotskyism but not Tchaikovsky-ism; such ‘-isms’ simply do not exist. And whilst each of these artists remain influential, admired and even inspirational, none of them sired an -ism: Wagner, however, did.

Borrowing the term ‘ambivalence’ from a 1943 essay written by Eric Bentley (an essay which asks the question ‘Is Hitler always right about Wagner?’), the music critic for The New Yorker, Ross provides two examples from the 1882 Bayreuth Festival production to illustrate the fundamental condition of Wagnerism. Firstly; whilst Wagner never intended to ban applause from Parsifal, he did request that there be no curtain calls after Act II so as not to ‘impinge on the impression’. When though, at the end of the performance, the audience simply stood up and left, Wagner was left plaintively asking whether they liked it or not: Wagner’s word could unintentionally become law. Secondly, when at that same performance the ever enthusiastic Wagner called out ‘Bravo!’ his intervention was roundly hissed by the audience. Even Wagner could not be allowed to spoil the Wagnerians’ worship of Wagner. In these two moments, Ross asserts, Wagnerism took leave of its Master.

Following an initial case study of the ambivalent relationship between Wagner and a young acolyte that Ross labels ‘the first Wagnerian’, the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, the central chapters broaden out to national and cultural case studies. This includes chapters on Wagner’s influence on decadence, esotericism, Zionism, gay rights, modernism, feminism, the list goes on and on, until it gets to the most successful, and the most persistent of the appropriations: that by far-right German nationalists in the 1920s.

Scottish Wagnerism is sadly absent, and Ross has surely missed the opportunity to reflect on the tragic fate of Glasgow School of Art. Amateur stagings of Wagner operas were performed there in the 1890s. Later Mackintosh and Macdonald would use leitmotif techniques to achieve profound aesthetic and psychological consequences. More recently, Alexander Stoddart has acknowledged that his modernism is solidly built on Wagnerian foundations. Perhaps then, it was just a tragic irony that led to Mackintosh’s gesamtkunstwerk on Garnethill being consumed by flames like Walhall at the close of Götterdämmerung. That, or criminal negligence. One of the two.

Ross is wise and gracious enough to acknowledge that much of the national European studies that he recounts have been written, in finer detail, elsewhere. Rosamund Bartlett’s Wagner and Russia, for example, provides considerably more detail on the stagings of Wagner in the early Soviet Union where the most frequently performed of Wagner’s operas was Rienzi. Nowadays, most productions of Rienzi adopt a derogatory, critical perspective on the eponymous hero, portraying him, at best, as a populist demagogue or, at worst, a proto-fascist. Such productions provide an affirmative to Bentley’s famous question and, Ross argues, grants Hitlerite thinking with a belated cultural victory.

Since Wagnerism is not a book about what Wagner thought, but what others thought and made of him and his works, it matters not, writes Ross, what Wagner thought about Jews or people of colour - what matters, in this context, is what they thought of him. Amongst those who make a simplistic conflation of race and culture, W.E.B. Du Bois’ Wagnerism is rarely discussed. Ross resurrects Du Bois’ lifelong personal and political engagement with Wagner and it will surprise many that The Souls of Black Folk, published in 1903 and described as the definitive text of the African American literary tradition, should culminate in a remarkable reworking of Wagner’s opera Lohengrin. For Russell A. Berman, Ross writes, both Du Bois’ story and Wagner’s opera are tales of incommensurability, but ‘when the white woman in the New York opera house recoils from the touch of a black man sitting beside her, it is the music of Lohengrin that holds out to him an alternative model of human relations; one in which she would not question his rank or race’. Thirty-three years later, when Du Bois shunned the 1936 Berlin Olympics to attend the Bayreuth Festival, he reported that he suffered no
race prejudice and that in the hotels and restaurants of the town, he was treated with nothing but respect. That Du Bois felt less open hostility in Nazi Germany than Roosevelt’s America is rightly judged by Ross to be a devastating verdict on liberal, egalitarian American race relations.

The most frequently used word in the many reviews of Ross’ book is ‘masterpiece’. It’s mentioned four times on the dust jacket alone. As Ross documents in this consuming, enthralling read, poets, politicians, writers and tyrants have all appropriated their own particular purposes. Everyone, it seems, wants a piece of the Master. Ross’ book is a treasure house of gossip anecdotes of the half-mad, the nearly always eccentric, the decadent, the dreamers, the obsessive, the desperate and the just plain lonely. It is consequently sad, poignant and, in places, immense fun. At over seven hundred pages Wagnerism will, of course, appeal primarily to the already initiated - but loved and loathed there is not a path into the twentieth century that bypasses Wagner.

Graeme Arnott is a member of the Wagner Society of Scotland

Gavin Esler, How Britain Ends: English Nationalism and the Rebirth of Four Nations, Head of Zeus, 2021, £9.99, 9781800241053 Reviewed by Andrew Noble

Born in a Clydebank council house, Esler is the descendant of Protestant refugees from Germany during the Thirty Years War of 1618-1648. Further, in 1912 six of his Ulster relatives living in Belfast signed the Ulster Covenant in the hope of remaining British rather than becoming Irish. In a sense, this book carries on the family tradition of political resistance. He is, however, the reverse of a dogmatic conservative. When he was the main presenter on BBC’s Newsnight, he was creatively flexible and ethically firm. He is an extremely erudite radical with no rigid ideology. As a writer with How Britain Ends, he has produced a book completely relevant to Britain’s dire political conditions. In the midst of a combination of economic and medical health chaos, he says ‘I want to explain why the UK cannot survive English nationalism.’

Does he mean it is fatally too late to stop Johnsonian English nationalism or that this book is designed to reveal that nationalism is as much a parody of genuine English tradition as Johnson is of Churchill and so thwart it? The following witty passage clarifies this problem to some extent: ‘I should also thank British governments over the past few years, in particular, that of Boris Johnson. They have inspired me to think how it came to pass that such a creative, competent and diverse group of people inhabiting these islands has ended up with a generation of leaders of astonishing complacency and incompetence’.

Esler is not alone in reviling post-Brexit Johnson. He is able to ruthlessly expose Johnson’s perverted historical rhetoric and ideas (in so far as the PM is capable of consistent thought). The use or rather abuse of Edmund Burke is particularly absurd in that it stresses English organic evolution while everyone else evolves from fabricated ideologies. There is a post-Trumpian echo in Johnson’s ‘England First’. This logically entails the break-up of the UK. Johnson’s totally counter-productive foray in Scotland does not mean a change of heart. It means that he knows that by decree the PM who loses Scotland has to resign immediately.

Esler balances his intelligent negativity towards Johnson and company with his profound positivism towards the UK. He seems always to have had a deep need to know each part of the UK. As a student he went from Scotland to two English universities to study Irish literature. With the BBC, he has had the benefit of working in every British capital. This makes his profound distaste for the English ruling class ever sharper. It has given us austerity, marketisation of the NHS that devastated it prior to Covid and the Brexit Referendum.

To get his way over Europe Johnson immediately removed the whip from 29 MPs, thus depriving the Tory party of any remaining wisdom and integrity. Gavin Esler correctly believes that the appearance of right-wing English nationalism heralded the death of the UK. If the Irish descended Catholic Biden had not won, we might well have become an annex of Trumpian America.

Dr Andrew Noble is a Leverhulme Emeritus Fellow

The Red Paper
Reviewed by Vince Mills

In the latest issue of the Red Paper, it is argued that the Scottish Parliament has fallen far short of the kind of parliament we need in these days of footloose, vampire capitalism. The current, dire state of the Scottish economy and the need for a radical strategy to address it are covered by Professors Byrne and Foster. Mike Cowley contests the strategies for change that radical independence movement are putting forward, while arguing that the left across the political spectrum must find a way to work together to build a socialist response to the current crisis. Alongside Neil Findlay’s article (see SLR Mar/Apr 2021), Tommy Kane also argues that if we are to resist the poverty and misery contemporary capitalism is inflicting on Scottish communities, we need appropriate powers at the appropriate level and this requires a more powerful parliament. Together, Findlay and Kane both argue we can win consent for such a powerful parliament by having a third option on the ballot paper of any future referendum on Scotland’s constitution. Professor James Mitchell shows, in compelling detail, how that democratic exercise can be undertaken fairly. Sean Griffin and Beth Winters argue that instead of an increase in powers to devolved nations, precisely the opposite is happening and that in order to give capitalism more scope for increasing profits across Britain, the existing powers of the devolved parliaments are being attacked, mainly but not exclusively, through the Internal Market Act 2020. This issue is available at https://www.scottishlabourleft.co.uk/articles-reports/red-paper-on-scotland-january-2021

Vince Mills is a Labour left activist in Glasgow
A spring arrives and we slowly emerge from the winter lockdown, we appear to have entered some bizarre parallel universe where Dominic Cummings preaches about honesty, integrity and ethics; where Alex Salmond pledges to ‘put women front and centre’ of his party’s policies; and where Gordon Brown warns ‘Project Fear won’t work’. I suppose it’s no more bizarre than Amanda Holden judging talent.

Boris Johnson claimed that “there’s nothing to see here” in the cash-for-curtains scandal. And, obviously, there was nothing to see, as the £840-a-roll wallpaper was hidden behind several grands worth of curtains. I’ve been seriously thinking of setting up a crowdfunding page to help with the refurbishment of the PM’s flat, providing it’s done using the same cladding as Grenfell Tower.

Johnson is reputed to have ranted that he would rather watch the bodies pile high than order a second lockdown. Tragically, when faced with the choice of piling up bodies or ordering a lockdown, he chose to do both.

However, it does strike me as being a perverse way of keeping the economy open. Hospitality and non-essential retail may have been particularly hard-hit over the past fourteen months, but not many people are going to want to go down to the pub if the beer garden is full of corpses. Likewise, it’s pointless for Primark to be open for business if the fitting rooms resemble makeshift morgues.

Hopefully, you will be able to read this column in your local pub, as Scotland embraces a further lifting of restrictions. From mid-May, we will be able to gather in groups indoors, to stay overnight in other people’s houses, to travel overseas and to hug each other. In other words, all things that professional footballers and to hug each other. In other words, all things that professional footballers

It is possible that not all the relaxations will apply in Moray, due to the worrying spread of the virus in the area.

Although, a much more worrying virus has existed in Moray since 2017, in the form of its local MP. A man who has the twin roles of leader of the Scottish Conservatives and the SPFL’s most pro-Rangers referee. While he was elected unopposed to the former, competition for the latter of those two titles is extremely fierce.

Having done his best to deny Celtic getting to ten-in-a-row, Douglas Ross thankfully failed to prevent the SNP winning four-in-a-row. Which was very good news for travelling communities the length and breadth of Scotland, who can sleep soundly in their caravans for the next five years. When questioned what he would do in his first day as First Minister, Ross famously replied that he would ‘bring in tougher enforcement on gypsy travelers’. Wow! Ethnic cleansing on Day 1. One shudders to think what was in his long-term plans for Scotland.

South of the border, the biggest political news of the year was the stunning result in the Hartlepool by-election. The Conservatives' victory in the seat was the first time since 1954 that the town has elected a Tory MP. However, from 1992 to 2004, they did vote for Peter Mandelson, which is pretty much the same thing.

Brexit was a major issue in the Hartlepool vote, which should come as no surprise. After all, this is a place where, according to local folklore, the townspeople hanged a monkey during the Napoleonic War because they thought it was a French spy. It would appear that a high degree of residual Euroscepticism has lingered on, more than two hundred years later.

Keir Starmer said he ‘took full responsibility’ for the Hartlepool result. And to prove how much responsibility he was taking, he sacked Angela Rayner, and completely re-shuffled the shadow cabinet. How responsible, non?

Anyway, the results are in for another election, one which may be historic on two counts. Firstly, it has delivered a clear mandate for a second independence referendum, no matter which way the Tories want to spin the figures. Secondly, if the current PM has his way, it could have been the last time you voted without having to produce photo ID. This is a sinister plan to disenfranchise the most already-disadvantaged in society, in the guise of preventing what is a near-non-existent crime. And, unsurprisingly, a complete volte-face from the PM.

When Blair proposed introducing identity cards back in 2005, Johnson claimed that if he was asked to produce one, he would ‘take it out of wallet and physically eat in the presence of whatever emanation of the state has demanded I produce it.’ That statement explains one thing at least. Namely, that if he is prepared to put any old shit into his mouth, it is no surprise so that so much shit comes out of it too.

Vladimir McTavish is one of the regular panelists on ‘The Thursday Show’ live on Twitch and YouTube every Thursday evening at 8pm.

Derek McKechnie explains why he created the UCS work-in image on the back cover

My parents grew up during the 1970s in Glasgow to working class families and both their fathers worked on the shipyards. I think the UCS work-in directly had an effect on the people they became. Both became social workers, both joined unions, and both protested for the miners. And as their parents have influenced them, they have influenced me by imparting a desire for social justice and equality. This is why I chose to research the UCS for my honour’s year art degree at the Gray’s School of Art at Robert Gordon University. As it is 50 years since the work-in, it seemed appropriate to investigate a topic I have been aware of the majority of my life but have never fully understood. I was immediately intrigued and revered the power of solidarity of the workers, the support they generated and the impact the protest had on Scottish history. The legacy of UCS should never be forgotten.

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