

scottishleftreview

Issue 4 April/May 2001

WHY VOTE?

The triumph of cynicism



Donald Gorrie and Elaine Smith on housing stock transfer

Phil McGarry on re-nationalisation of the railways

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scottishleftreview

Issue 2 December 2000

A journal of the left in Scotland brought about since the formation of the Scottish Parliament in July 1999

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Front Page Cartoon: Jim Blair

comment

Jimmy Reid

Pundits of all kinds are voicing fears that the impending General Election will see the lowest turnout of voters in a UK election since the last war. Cynicism is widespread, it is claimed, about the two main parties in the UK and the political system, and the electoral system. I believe that the British first past the post elections have consistently distorted the voting intentions of the electorate but stoutly deny it's a factor in voter reluctance to vote. The same goes, in my opinion, for the political system, flawed though it is. The cynicism, though I would call it disillusionment, among the electorate emanates from the manifest and rampant cynicism among the two main UK parties. Some say they are without vision. Maybe it's nearer the truth to say that they have the same vision. New Labour has left intact the Thatcherite State. The privatised utilities will be left in the hands of private capital and its all-consuming profit motive, whatever party wins. In the workplace Thatcherism decisively shifted power in favour of the bosses by constraining the ability of workers to defend themselves through pernicious anti trade union laws; these will remain whatever party wins. Both parties embrace de-regulated markets, at home and abroad. They share the same macho economic strategy, the same taxation policies, and ipso facto the same social policies. New Labour in four years of Government has spent less in the public sector, as a percentage of Gross Domestic Product, than John Major's Government did in 1996/97. That is why there are continuing crises in the public services. The Tory Private Finance Initiative (PFI) was re-branded as Public Private Partnership (PPP) by New Labour. It is, of course, the same thing.

The difficulty about getting people to the polling station might not be the lack of political conviction but a strong political conviction that there is no real choice on offer. But the right to vote implies the right not to vote. It need not be negative to refuse to vote for what you perceive to be different forms of evil. To vote, as some argue, for a lesser evil could become a habit leading to the permanent empowerment of evil; that is the dilemma of many. The Tories as things stand have no chance of winning unless a recession hits the UK before polling day in June, and that's unlikely in the timescale. Big Business has deserted them and now supports New Labour as the current best bet to safeguard its interests. Then there is the indisputable fact that every vote for New Labour will be a ringing endorsement of New Labour policies as listed above. I repeat, for many on the left this is a real dilemma and not a theoretical abstraction.

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This is why we commissioned article by Joyce McMillan, whom I warmly welcome to these pages, and Henry McCubbin, and SLR stalwart. Both in their different ways are thought provoking. One of the distinctions we have to make on the Scottish Left is that even in a UK General Election the political culture up here now differs profoundly from that which applies south of the border, is a factor. A recent survey shows that 45 per cent of Scots consider themselves to be to the left of New Labour. That in prevailing electoral terms is a majority. The Tories are not one of two main parties in Scotland. At best they are third. The SNP is the second party in Scotland and is programmatically Social Democrat that places it substantially to the left of New Labour. Then there is Tommy Sheridan's SSP which flies the red flag of socialism. What is the point, as some on the Left do, of muttering about the ultra left possibly subverting Labour when Labour has already been subverted by the ultra right? My best wishes go to the candidates of the SNP and the SSP and any genuine left Labour candidates that have survived the Party's selection procedures. There might be some worthy lefts among the Lib Dems. Over the years I have known a few.

Donald Gorrie, Lib Dem MSP and Elaine Smith, Labour MSP, have both opposed the Housing Stock Transfer which is simply another euphemism for privatisation. Through the sale of Housing Association houses this will further reduce the number of houses available for rent to those who can't afford to buy a home. This can only add in the long term to the number of homeless. Something like 120 local housing organisations in Glasgow were invited

to apply for a grant to the Glasgow Housing Association of up to £15,000. There is to be a vote of Glasgow Council tenants on the Stock Transfer proposals. I have a document from the GHA to the applicants explaining that "our objective is to create a positive dialogue with the New LHOs [Local Housing Organisations] network so that the tenants voting in the stock transfer ballot can clearly see that the proposals reflect the management and investment need of their community." These grants could amount to something like £1,500,000 to be used in getting votes for housing stock transfer in the teeth of bitter opposition from many tenants. Is this a legitimate legal expenditure? As they say – we have a right to know. I would like supporting organisations to reprint the articles by Elaine and Donald for the benefit of their members who might be tenants in Glasgow.

Also in this issue are articles by Phil McGarry of the RMT union arguing the case for public ownership. He is spot on. Experience of what were public services run now as profit making enterprises has led to a mounting public opinion that favours, for example, taking British Railways back into public ownership. Andy Anderson makes a point in his article about the failure of State nationalisation. He is right. State ownership is not necessarily public ownership. In this country nationalisation was bureaucratic and not democratic. Andrew Richardson beguiles us with his ruminations about matters constitutional, about socialism and Scotland. One of the aims of the SLR is to view things philosophical, political, cultural and economic, from a Scottish perspective without descending into the kailyard. ■

The difficulty about getting people to the polling station might not be the lack of political conviction but a strong political conviction that there is no real choice on offer



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(Scottish Region)

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Executive Council Member: John McGhee

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idealists colluding with cynics

Joyce McMillan

As I write, in mid-March 2001, Westminster politics is in the throes of yet another fitness-to-rule feeding frenzy. Among the current candidates for ritual sacrifice are the junior foreign office minister Keith Vaz (accused of obstructing parliamentary inquiries into his relationship with various business interests), former Treasury minister Geoffrey Robinson (alleged to have once received a £200,000 payment from Robert Maxwell), Foreign Secretary Robin Cook (said to have misled parliament over British involvement in Sierra Leone), and William Hague, found guilty of claiming that he was paying lecture fees into a special trust fund, at a time when the fund did not exist. The Chairman of the Tory Party complains without a trace of irony about the "stench" of corruption rising from the Blair government, and its manifest unfitness for office; the general atmosphere is strongly reminiscent of the last days of the Major government, when ministers from Neil Hamilton to Jonathan Aitken were engulfed in a rising tide of allegations about sleaze and influence-peddling.

Nor is the new Scottish Parliament and Executive exempt from this culture of contempt; indeed Jimmy Reid, writing in *The Scotsman* on 19 March 2001, probably expresses a fairly widespread popular opinion of it when he describes the Scottish Executive as "crammed with careerists, chancers, place-seekers, political thugs ... and intellectual lightweights".

It's hardly surprising, in other words, that the electorate is feeling increasingly apathetic about, if not disgusted by, the process of formal politics; the view from street-level suggests, in a nutshell, that Britain's political leaders have deteriorated within a generation from a class of venerable, intelligent, and generally trustworthy public servants into a bunch of cheap and contemptible time-servers who are all "in it for themselves", and who spend their lives trying to ensure their personal futures by schmoozing campaign donations from the filthy rich.

What we are seeing - particularly in Britain, but to some extent across the western world - is not so much a collapse as a complete meltdown of trust between people and governments, to the point where effective government action is often made difficult or impossible by the levels of scepticism and non-cooperation that surround it; and the task for the left, in this situation, is not only to analyse the causes of this collapse of trust, but to engage in some serious new thinking about what would constitute a radical response to it.

So far as causes are concerned, there seems to be general agreement on the radical left that to a large extent, centre-left politicians in Britain have brought these problems upon themselves. In ideological terms, they are seen as having capitulated to Thatcherism to an extent that was bound to generate mass disappointment and disillusion among ordinary voters, sticking to Tory spending targets, defending ideologically-driven policies like PFI, continuing the broad thrust of divisive Tory education policies, acting tough on asylum and immigration at the expense of basic human rights, and failing to seize the initiative on key collective issues like the environment and transport. In its crude form, this analysis expresses itself in furious personal attacks on New Labour politicians, who are seen as lacking the courage, principle and intellectual strength to stand out against the right-wing orthodoxies of the age.

In its more sophisticated form - as put forward by George Monbiot in his recent powerful polemic **The Captive State** - these politicians are seen as prisoners of the aggressive character of modern corporate capitalism, which strives relentlessly to diminish the power of national governments, to lock them into irreversible programmes of deregulation and privatisation, and to 'buy up' the political process through party funding and other forms of influence. But either way, the apathy of voters is understood as a rational reaction to the growing powerlessness of political systems - new and old, reformed and unreformed - to 'make a real difference'; the financial masters of the universe have the game sown up, and politics has been reduced to a sideshow, a media event, a kind of **Celebrity Big Brother** in which we vote politicians out of power not because of their policies, but because we are tired of the sight of their faces.

But this is where the picture becomes more complicated; for although this analysis is tremendously powerful and persuasive in many aspects, it is incomplete. It can undoubtedly be shown that in many areas, national governments have lost power since 1945 or 1960. It is clear that the economic basis of the party-political system has changed as electoral campaigns have become more elaborate and expensive; once largely funded by grassroots subscriptions and donations from civil-society organisations, the system now seems more like the creature of large wealthy interests, a top-down phenomenon which voters regard as compromising the freedom of elected members genuinely to represent their constituents. And it is unarguable that since 1979,

the distinction between private and public sectors has been deliberately blurred in ways that increasingly leave governments unable to act without the support of the private sector; witness the protracted agony of the Millennium Dome, a government-led effort at national celebration which ended up looking like a cheap product-placement opportunity for the companies which sponsored the various 'zones'.

But there's also a sense in which our perception of the powerlessness and uselessness of government seems to be running well ahead of the reality, and to have been pushed in that direction by forces which are anything but progressive in their political aims. It can be argued - and has been argued by many thinkers on the left - that the British state has always been involved in a collusive and in some ways 'captive' relationship with capital; what has changed since the 1970's, according to this view, is not so much the extent of that collusion, as the extent to which it is no longer concealed from the public. Until fairly late in the 20th century, the forces of capital in Britain seem to have felt an interest in preserving the respect and reverence of ordinary citizens for the institutions of the state. They would typically suppress scandalous information about the Royal family and many senior politicians, obey a powerful set of unspoken rules about the risk of allowing the hoi polloi to know too much, and generally conspire to maintain the credibility and prestige of the existing political order.

But with the 'Murdochisation' of the British media from the Eighties onward, all of that has changed beyond recognition. Today, the shock-troops of capital portray themselves as new market populists, champions of the people against an arrogant and out-of-touch political class who steal the money of hard-working citizens under cover of taxation, and then use it largely for personal gain. Bred up in the profoundly anti-government ethos of the 1980s, chanting the mantra of 'private enterprise good, public service bad' from their political cradles, the leaders of this crusade believe, with the former editor of the Daily Record Martin Clarke, that "all politicians are c**s" by definition. Their aim is to discredit and weaken all political structures, the better to clear the decks for the operation of a free market unfettered by regulation or any talk of democratic control; their technique is to ignore the positive achievements of government where they exist, to expose the personal

failings and corruption of politicians with a rigour unknown in any other professional field, and to take every opportunity to promote the idea that democracy, and democratic institutions, are a busted flush, and a waste of everyone's time and money.

And it takes very little imagination to see how the rhetoric of many thinkers and commentators on the radical left - the rhetoric of militant disillusion with New Labour and the electoral process, of wholesale dismissal of the policies changes implemented since 1997, and of strongly-expressed personal contempt towards most elected politicians and ministers - actually colludes with that reactionary anti-democratic agenda, rather than challenging it; how it helps to promote public apathy and a profound sense of political helplessness, soothed only by the rituals of consumerism.

What we need now is not another wave of polemic about the failure of electoral politics but a sharper analysis of the precise degree of that failure

So what we need now, it seems to me, is not another wave of polemic about the failure of British electoral politics and the reactionary tendencies of New Labour - entertaining though that might be - but a sharper analysis of the precise degree of that failure, and of how we on the left can sustain our critique of policies and politicians that fail the people, without colluding in the nihilistic trashing of the democratic institutions for which so many of our political forebears fought, and which represent the basic tools for any peaceful political change we may be able to achieve in future.

Throughout most of the 20th century, when Britain was a mighty battleship state protected by great armour-plates of complacency and mystique, the left could enjoy the luxury of slinging cannonballs at it, confident that the levers of power would still be there, and in working order, the next time a more progressive government came to power. But now, in Scotland, we find ourselves faced with a fledgling Parliament struggling under a barrage of fierce reaction from those who dislike democratic institutions on principle, and a British government increasingly despised by its own people for its impotent, venal and weakened state; time to rethink our traditional reflexes, to learn the art of strengthening political institutions as well as tearing them down, and to retarget our guns away from the symptoms of the problem of political decline, and onto its source. ■

no choice, no point, no vote

Henry McCubbin

When Prime Minister Blair came to Glasgow recently to prepare his troops for an early General Election the section of his speech highlighted for the press was not his usual unconnected list of 'Third Way' visions but a sermon on cynicism. If I am correct, my interpretation of the scriptures according to the Rev. Blair runs; anyone who is not a true believer in the Blair project is a cynic, cynics cause apathy amongst the voters therefore cynics are to blame for low turnouts which could cause new Labour to loose seats. Yet, low turnout has appeared as a major feature on the political scene at an international level. Has cynicism been globalised or is there another explanation for this phenomenon?

Low turnout as an international phenomenon

Turnout has been taxing the best brains in the US for some time now. Martin P. Wattenberg of the Center for the Study of Democracy, UC Irvine, University of California has studied not only the US but looked into international comparisons.

Change in Turnout in OECD Countries Since the 1950s			
	First 2 1950s Elections	2 Most Recent Elections	Percentage Change
Switzerland	60.8	36.9	-39
France	69.7	56.4	-19
New Zealand	92.6	75.0	-19
Luxembourg	70.1	58.6	-16
United States	61.7	52.2	-15
Japan	73.0	62.7	-14
Austria	87.8	75.9	-14
UK	81.5	72.3	-11
Germany	81.1	72.0	-11
Netherlands	85.2	76.4	-10
Canada	65.9	60.5	-9
Ireland	73.8	67.8	-9
Italy	89.5	82.0	-8
Finland	76.8	71.1	-7
Belgium	82.7	78.1	-6
Iceland	90.3	86.7	-4
Norway	77.9	75.5	-3
Australia	81.1	80.4	-1
Denmark	77.5	80.4	+4
Sweden	76.9	81.1	+5

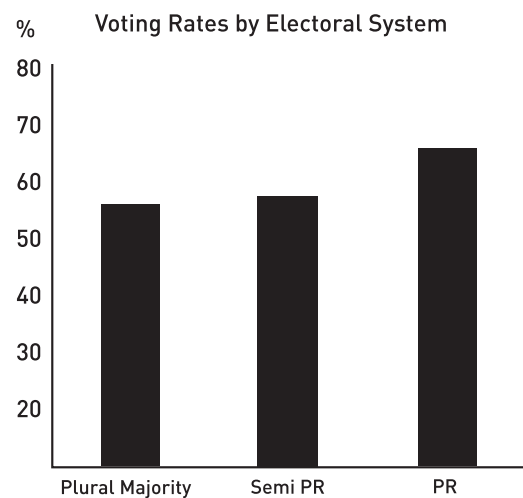
Removing the obstacles from registering to vote

The Americans have been aware of their decline in turnout for some time. Their response has been to encourage people to register, an historic problem in relation to the black vote, and to make the process of voting and registration easier. If we look at the success or otherwise of these attempts we might gain indications as to the effect of changes being proposed for the UK. The bad news is that the decline has continued whether polling is on holidays or in supermarkets. With regards to weekend or holiday voting recent studies have shown that it is on average 6 per cent higher than midweek voting, Thursday

in the UK and Tuesday in the USA, but it too has been declining over time. It has also declined whether the state in question has motor voting i.e. you register when you licence your car, or indeed has ultra liberal rules where you may register at the polling station on the day of the election. Voting has declined where electronic or machine voting takes place. Who could forget Florida's pregnant chads? I would put it that turnout decline is independent of the above responses by the authorities to reverse the phenomenon.

Making the voting system 'fairer'

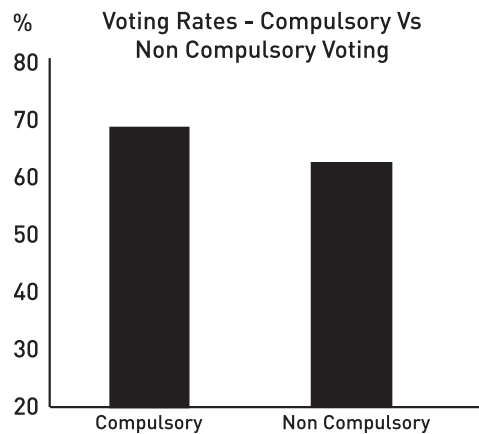
The Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) has carried out much comparative work on the difference between electoral systems and turnout. Below is table from their Global Study comparing electoral systems grouped, for the sake of the study in to three family groups viz. Plurality-Majority, Semi-Proportional (Semi-PR), and Proportional (PR).



Ah! cry the liberals – PR is ahead. True, from this study and in particular the way the grouping has worked out in the above graph, but the rate of decline in PR voting has been similar to that for plural-majority and it is decline that I am looking at.

A further way to increase turnout would be to make turnout compulsory. The best European example may be that of Belgium, yet Table 1 shows us that turnout has declined there also. In fact IDEA has collated the results of compulsory versus non-compulsory voting for us in the graph below.

So where to now in our investigation? The electoral technocrats do not appear to have the answers therefore we are going to have to call on our friends in the social and political sciences to offer solutions.



Costs and benefits of voting

I think that Martin Wattenberg should tell his story at this point. "In particular, the information costs that Americans typically encounter as they decide whether or not to vote are often overwhelming. As I look at what I am being asked to vote on in California this year, I find that even as a Political Science professor my level of political information is inadequate to deal with the many questions at stake. For example, I have voted for state Controller in four elections but I have yet to learn what the holder of this office actually does. When I ask my university students, the answer I always get back is, "He (or she) controls." Usually, I can prod someone into saying that the Controller deals with money. But students are stumped when I ask how this position differs from state Treasurer, which is also an elected office. I then pose further rhetorical questions, such as what are the issues in the campaigns for state Insurance Commissioner, Superintendent of Schools, or Secretary of State, and whether they know anything about the judges we have to decide whether to retain. Finally, I read off a few obscure California propositions, such as a 1994 vote on whether to abolish justice courts. By the time I am done, I think I have made my point: All these demands on citizens probably discourages many people from voting in the first place."

Unlike America's system, there is another democracy in which voters are faced with similarly high information costs. This country is Switzerland, and the similarities it shares with the United States in this respect may well account for the low turnout rates in each. The Swiss and American electoral systems are in that they call upon their citizens to vote for numerous offices and regularly employ referenda to decide specific policy issues that are left to the parties to work out in most other countries. Switzerland's Federal Council is a unique executive branch that involves a form of permanent power sharing between the parties that is functionally equivalent to government in the United States.

All of these features add up to elections being far more complex in the United States and Switzerland than in other established democracies. Political power is very decentralized, thereby making it extremely difficult for people to assess responsibility for governmental performance. At the same time, their citizens are called upon to make many decisions at the polling booth. In short, an examination of the American and Swiss cases leads to the following basic proposition about turnout:

Reasons for Not Voting (%)	
Could not take time off from work/school	21.5
Not interested	16.6
Sick/disabled/family emergency	14.9
Did not prefer any of the candidates	13.0
Out of town	11.1
Other reasons	10.3
Forgot to vote	4.4
Had no way to get to the polls	4.3
Don't know; refused	2.3
Lines too long at the polls	1.2

build a user friendly electoral system and voters will come; build an overly complex system and they will stay away.

I will put a marker down here. Are we now seeing signs of the above surfacing in Scotland?

Studies have found that many people vote simply because for one reason or another they care who wins. People who have an interest in who should govern and what government should do are thus more likely to feel that there is a benefit to voting, just like people with a favourite team are more likely to attend a sporting event. As shown in the table below from the US, two of the major reasons respondents chose for not voting in 1996 were a lack of interest and the fact that they did not prefer any of the candidates.

An overall reduction in the benefits of political expression provides the most plausible source for turnout decline. After all, the benefits of influencing the election and doing one's civic duty have not changed, and the costs of voting have either decreased or stayed about the same.

The part of Parties

At the heart of the psychological approach to turnout is party identification. As such, people with a stronger party identification are bound to think they have more at stake on election day. If one identifies with a party, then when that party wins he or she wins along with it. Furthermore, partisanship enables voters to easily interpret the complex

political world and thus lessens the information costs associated with voting.

Ironically, the decline of American political parties in recent decades has made strength of partisanship even more important in predicting who votes in that strong party identifiers are now voting at substantially greater levels compared to the national average. If partisanship is so important to turnout then the demise of Labour's heartlands support could be more significant than first thought.

The decline in turnout in the larger European countries arguably can be attributed to the collaboration between political elites in the major parties and to the increase in elections fought on personality contests versus party contests. In Germany the Grand Coalition of the 1980s was followed by a reduced turnout. In France, presidential politics and 'cohabitation' as practiced by Mitterand was similarly followed by a drop in turnout. The rise of media magnate Berlusconi in Italy and the demise of the corrupt centrist coalition parties saw a dramatic decline in turnout. In Scandinavia, where political parties that mobilize the working classes have traditionally been strong, recent turnout rates compared well with those of the early 1950s. Sweden and Denmark are the two countries in which turnout has actually increased. Finland, Iceland, and Norway are all near the bottom of the list in terms of participation decline. The largest drop in British turnout from one election to the next was recorded from 1992 to 1997 when the Labour Party was transformed into a party much less tied to the union movement and socialist beliefs. Much of this decline could be found in Blair's relative success at attracting volatile swing voters from the centre ground but failing to attract voters from low socio-economic status to the polls.

Different wrappers same globalised contents

Turnout in Scotland reflects this trend in that the four constituencies recording less than 60 per cent turnout were all in Glasgow and those over 80 per cent were Stirling, Galloway and Upper Nithsdale, Dumfries and Ayr. With the trends shown above the conclusion must be that the inability of certain groups of electors to exercise meaningful choice in the political system is the most likely reason for turnout decline. The decline has also been accompanied by the adoption of neo liberal dogma by many political parties formerly committed to the democratic control of the economy. The acceptance of the Washington Consensus of fiscal discipline, public expenditure priorities, tax reforms like the introduction of

VAT, financial liberalization, privatisation and deregulation has, along with the operation of the World Trade Organisation promoting free not fair trade on the terms of American multinational capital, has left working class voters not cynical but decoupled from the political process.

I cannot see why Blair and his colleagues should be so down on cynics. Who pledged to keep student grants, to make the railways publicly owned again, to stop all selection in state schools, to keep private medicine from acting parasitically on the NHS, not to privatise London Underground etc., then discarded these pledges when in power? There are no prizes for answering new Labour. If we are looking for barefaced cynicism towards the electorate we need look no further. Prime Minister Blair is failing to distinguish between cynicism and criticism, the latter being the lifeblood of democracy. Criticism was banished from the Labour Party by the intellectually challenged Neil Kinnock when he put in place its policy forums and turned its annual conference into a rally. Criticism has been removed from the parliamentary party by gerrymandered selection procedures for 1997 or the threat of the same for 2001. Criticism has been removed from the cabinet by either cancelling meetings or ensuring that they last no longer than an episode of **Ready Steady Cook** – except that the TV programme permits the participants to vote between red tomatoes or green peppers.

Why vote? There is little doubt that the economic and social rights of ordinary people have taken a blow because of the adoption of neo liberalism by the political party set up working people to contest liberalism's market determinism. At any moment in the day capitalists like Rupert Murdoch can vote with their capital on the stock exchanges, yet the ability of the dispossessed to vote against the whims of the so-called invisible hand of the market have been confiscated by public school entryists in the Labour party. But who could ever have imagined by-election turnouts below 30 per cent or the turnout in Sunderland of 1.5 per cent in the Euro Election. In fact, more people voted in the last episode of Channel 4's Big Brother than in the Euro Elections. No doubt many will stay at home in disgust at the General Election but there are alternatives which will send out the message that ordinary people once again want to be engaged in their own futures. In Scotland the SNP and the Scottish Socialist Party offer respectively a social democrat and a socialist alternative. To hell with voting for the better-of-two-evilism or abstaining – you can vote for socialism because, according to The Sun, Blair's got it in the bag. ■

meet the new radicals

Andy Anderson

When I first went to work in a fife colliery in 1953 I can recall some of the older miners telling us boys about the day the National Coal Board took over the pit. All the men were delighted. One climbed up the headgear and put a red flag on it. This was now their pit – it was a socialist dream, the coal mines were in the hands of the workers at last.

By 1953 that dream had been shattered. The coal mines were run as a State Capitalist enterprise, the workers who had been terribly exploited continued to be exploited and the fruits of the industry were siphoned off in high interest rates and low prices to private industry.

I was a trade union lay official and full time official for a quarter of a century and the vast majority of the people I represented were employees of State owned industries or services. They were often among some of the most exploited in the working class who would have been even more so if they were not unionised. In the place of co-operativism and syndicalism we found an unaccountable quango claiming to act on behalf of the workers, the customers, and the general public, while obviously working for none of these.

It is no wonder that young socialists today are not impressed with the idea of State Nationalised Industries being the road to socialism which they need to follow to provide a better future for them and others. We should of course vigorously defend the remaining public services like health education and postal services, and we must look for significant public control in water, fuel supply, transport and communications, but we must find a better model than the old style nationalised industries.

What was lost sight off in the State Nationalised industries was the involvement of the workers in the running of their industry or service and the involvement of the consumers or the general public in the overall strategy and pricing structure.

I now live in a small crofting community in Uig, North Skye. Five years ago on 16th October 1995 the infamous Skye toll bridge was foisted on the Skye people. In the small meetings held in Skye before the bridge opened, we were informed that any failure to pay the full toll demanded by the bridge company was to be a criminal and not a civil offence.

When this was first put to a meeting in the community there was silence while the full implications of that sunk

in. We noted that the Government had taken extraordinary care to support this private/public exercise. They had put through a special law which made it a criminal offence not to pay the full toll. They had done that even before the bridge proposal was put forward.

It was clear that the Government expected trouble and had made detailed plans to deal with it.

The realisation that we were confronting a Government which was well prepared for our resistance and which was ready to use the criminal law against us was quite sobering, particularly when we noted that not one of the opposition MPs had challenged this application of the criminal law in the process of the legislation through Westminster.

Quite frankly it was put up or shut up time for us. We either had to back off or we had to take on the Government and the Criminal law as well as powerful private companies. I do not know about the others, but I was scared and seriously considered backing off as every calculation I made proved that we just could not win. However, we were all very angry about the use of the criminal law to keep us under control and emotion rather than logic carried the day.

What I did not understand then was that for many of the small business people present this toll was the last straw. They felt that they had their backs to the wall and they wanted to go down fighting.

The decision to challenge the toll and the criminal law was made by a show of hands. Twelve people voted for the challenge – a few more who were present abstained – and the SKAT campaign had begun.

Driving home from the meeting I was sure I had made a mistake. I thought that only half of the 12 would actually make the challenge; all my previous experience told me that we would be ruthlessly crushed by the establishment and I reflected on what a fool I had been to let my heart rule my head.

Two weeks later when we arrived at midnight at the bridge to challenge the toll I was very surprised to find that instead of our numbers having halved they had doubled, with around 24 cars lined up to challenge the toll. A week later once the news of our challenge had got out there was around a hundred ready to challenge the toll, and eventually around a thousand did.

This was the first time I realised just how radicalised the small business people and the professionals in the community had become, that they were prepared to face criminal charges in order to register their opposition to a Government policy which they could see damaged their community.

We have seen this again in the fuel protests. The central question is did those taking action have the widespread support of the public? All the evidence shows that they did, since those who set out to get a public condemnation of the pickets have found it necessary to back track.

What we have witnessed here is a flexing of the muscles of a relatively new social phenomenon; working class, middle class, professionals, academics and a variety of other sections of society coming together to act in a united way against a perceived threat from the Big Business/Government partnership.

This is not new, since we have seen it develop gradually over the years, in the anti-nuclear and environmental conservation fields. However, it has developed very rapidly and is a much more potent force in our present society than many, including this Government, have appreciated.

What makes this force so potent is that the establishment have no means of dealing with it. The trade unions and old establish 'revolutionary' or 'radical' movements were large and therefore slow to move into action and easy to predict. They had stable chains of command and vulnerable resources which can be easily seized or neutralised in an emergency.

These new organisations spring into action from a standing start. They are normally active on single issue struggles. They do not have 'official' leaders – usually just people elected as spokesperson at a local meeting and easily and frequently changed. They have excellent communications as a result of new technology and they often have very good information and excellent sources of information. They are usually very articulate and are able, at relatively low cost, to get their position widely distributed so they can't be easily distorted by requiring to use limited channels through the newspapers.

It is clear that with a few thousand such activists who had the passive support of the mass of the public and who could transfer their actions from one area of the country to another before the authorities could even assemble a force to deal with one incident, they are a very powerful force.

The nature of this new movement is that it is essentially a local community based movement and it is from such local communities that it will sustain a democratic base or it will die. The leaders will be those who can show a local community that they have the understanding, and the practical experience to help them achieve their objectives.

I am not pessimistic about socialism's future, since I believe that the massive development in personal communication which new technology is introducing will greatly assist people to examine developments in industry, government, the economy etc. while at the same time giving them the means to contact others very quickly so that they can do something about it.

The big regiments of the working class are no longer there. The trade unions are a shadow of their post war predecessors. Even the massed ranks of professional, technical and clerical workers have gone. Indeed, the traditional middle class is now in the front line of the onslaught with small business people in retail, distribution, agriculture, fishing etc. being driven to the wall by powerful international businesses who control Governments.

With this development has come the gradual but steady radicalisation of the middle class who look desperately for allies among other isolated groups. New communications technology in the hands of these people can be a powerful weapon.

Those old socialists of the incurably romantic variety who are expecting socialism to be achieved by the massed ranks of the working class are destined for a disappointment. However, for any thinking socialist who looks for the substance of socialism, these developments show a potential for an interesting and very likely positive future. ■

Those who are expecting socialism to be achieved by the massed ranks of the working class are destined for a disappointment

out of stock

Two senior politicians consider the Scottish Executive's proposals to transfer Glasgow's public sector housing stock to housing association control

Donald Gorrie

To be honest, my initial interest in the Scottish government's draft Housing Bill arose from my hostility to the proposals for all tenants of Housing Associations to have the right to buy their houses. I then discovered the relationship between the stock transfer proposals and the right to buy proposals and took a closer look at them both.

Housing finance is bedevilled by the Treasury's ridiculous rules, which lead governments and councils to adopt some bizarre policies to get round them. The stock transfer proposals are one of these manoeuvres to bring finance into improving housing without it counting against the Treasury's rules. The scheme is therefore presented as 'the only game in town', because the Treasury will not provide the needed investment out of public funds, and if councils borrow the money in the traditional fashion it counts against them as expenditure.

I have sympathy with those national and local politicians who have succumbed to this 'only game in town' argument and have signed on for the stock transfer proposals, but I think they are wrong. In my view, we should instead form a coalition of the Scottish Parliament, Welsh and Northern Irish Assemblies, English councils and other public organisations to bring pressure to bear on the Treasury to adopt more sensible rules about capital expenditure, in line with those in many European Union countries.

My main objection to the stock transfer scheme is the lack of a true democratic choice for the tenants. I entirely support giving tenants a genuine vote as to how they wish their local community of tenanted houses to be managed. I wrote a pamphlet on forming Tenants' Co-operatives in the 1970s which became Liberal policy. Mrs Thatcher's headlong push for selling council houses at huge discounts made local Co-operatives harder to argue for. The choice offered to tenants is not based on the proverbial 'level playing field'. They are being told "Of course you have a free choice. You can choose to stay with the council and you will have no major repairs or improvements done to your home for the foreseeable future, or you can vote for the stock transfer scheme and quite soon you will benefit from major investment in improving and repairing your house and your community." That seems to me blackmail and not democracy. If there was a fair vote between staying with the council or going for a Housing Association, I would find that acceptable.

To me the key issue is to provide as many social-rent houses as possible of as good quality as possible. The government's proposals to enable Housing Association tenants to buy their houses would lead to a net reduction in the number of social-rent houses in Scotland. Even if some new ones are built, the number lost to the social-rent category would be much higher.

I was a Committee member of Castle Rock Housing Association for over 20 years, until I became an MP. I think that good housing associations make a great contribution to the communities they serve. The combination of well-motivated and competent staff, with the mixture of public-spirited volunteers from the community and tenants' representatives on the committee delivers a good community service. There are no doubt some less good housing associations and some become too big and lose their local connections, but most of them are a good vehicle for providing social-rent housing.

I think the way forward in managing social-rent houses should be through a combination of community-based housing associations and of tenants co-operatives in council estates.

The right to buy is being imposed on housing associations because of the Executive's desire to push through the stock transfer in Glasgow; the right to buy was a carrot to persuade tenants to vote for the transfer. There is almost universal opposition to it among housing associations and widespread opposition to it among MSPs from many parts of Scotland. There is also widespread opposition among MSPs, but only in private among Labour ones, to the fact that the drive for a particular solution in Glasgow is imposing stock transfer on other councils who may favour other solutions.

The arguments of the Liberal Democrats within the coalition and of housing associations and others outside have had some effect in improving the government's proposals regarding the right to buy, but not much on the stock transfer front.

All the effort has gone into making a fundamentally mistaken scheme less damaging. We need to persevere in trying to get the whole Housing Bill radically reformed, but I fear the government machine will roll on as usual, and get things wrong as usual.

I believe that a home is a fundamental human right yet, in Scotland today, thousands of people are homeless. A walk along the streets of Glasgow or Edinburgh of an evening is a chilling experience if you care to notice the numbers of souls lying in the shadows with their begging bowls in front of them. These people are the more obvious homeless. Many others are on seemingly never ending waiting lists, some of them living in intolerable housing conditions including overcrowding or sharing with friends or relatives. Many women and children remain in homes suffering from domestic abuse because they fear homelessness even more than they fear their abuser.

Several Ministers have described the Housing Bill as the most radical piece of housing legislation in Scotland for two decades. In my view, for this bill to be radical it would have to enshrine a right to rent. Sadly, the extension of the right to buy and the underpinning agenda of stock transfer are likely to exclude many people from having a right to rent. The bill might be seen as radical but only in terms of the astonishing fact that a Labour-led Government is continuing to pursue with passion a Conservative housing agenda. Stock transfer is not Labour's flagship policy; it's the Conservatives'. They introduced it and it still has their sinister support.

Prior to being the party of Government, the Labour Party, and many senior politicians therein, fought to have the Council option included in ballots on stock transfer. I am not aware that Labour Party policy has changed. The policy discussions on the paper Local Government Housing have not yet finished. In short, Ministers are vigorously pursuing this policy of stock transfer in the coalition Scottish Executive. Clearly, the status quo of poor repair and maintenance is not an option for Council Housing. It seems to me that local authorities pursuing stock transfer are mainly doing so because they believe that this is the only way of repairing and maintaining stock and thus allowing tenants to live in decent quality housing. In other words, it's the only game in town. If debts can be written off when housing transfers then it's obviously possible to write them off for our Councils and allow them to invest in their housing stock.

Labour's manifesto for the Scottish election stated, "Any change will be voluntary - supported by the tenants in a ballot." The reality is that, unless the Council option

is there, including all necessary resources, tenants are being offered Hobson's choice. The Council option must remain, with debt write off and systems in place to allow councils to offer decent quality, affordable rented accommodation. If there was a level playing field and tenants then initiated a transfer that would be truly voluntary.

How far would the Conservatives progress this agenda? They have said that under their administration all council stock will be transferred without ballot. The proposed bill can only serve to assist that end.

Is stock transfer privatisation? What is clear is that the finance is private. To me, that is privatisation. Sanctions for not meeting income stream targets will include raising rents, empty properties could be sold through private sale or the lenders could put their appointed management in place. All of this was admitted by the Council of Mortgage Lenders in their evidence to the Social Inclusion, Housing and Voluntary sector Committee on 7th February 2000.

The window dressing to sell this bill is that of community ownership and participation. That is a convenient veneer. Worse, it causes division in the Labour Party. Politicians who once stated that they would not entertain the idea of transferring houses away from local authorities are excitedly embracing this Tory agenda, wrapped up as community empowerment. I have even heard it argued that Gordon Brown would never be persuaded to change the financial rules to allow Councils to invest. If the Labour Party were mindful to require that, then I would suggest that the Chancellor would have to find a way to do just that.

Stock transfer is not Labour's flagship policy; it's the Conservatives

I do not dispute the fact that there are many excellent examples of community-based housing associations. A number of these emerged as a reaction to the Thatcherite Housing Agenda of the 1980's, designed to destroy Council

Housing. I do not believe that stock transfer is the only way of achieving investment and empowering communities. Council housing is as valid a form of community ownership as any other. Legislative steps could be taken to ensure tenants have real, effective involvement within the local authority model.

As the Gender reporter to the Equal Opportunities Committee, I believe that it is also important to look at the

proposed Legislation and stock transfer from a woman's perspective.

It has been proved that, on average, throughout their working lives, women earn less than men. Mortgages are not easily available to those on low incomes, part-time or temporary contracts or with interrupted employment records. Mostly, those in these categories are women, and there are ample figures to prove that women in particular, have a need for good, affordable rented accommodation.

This issue has particular relevance for the many women fleeing domestic abuse. Research shows that at present one in 10 women are being abused and over a lifetime, one in four will be abused. The decline in suitable housing for rent has resulted in families spending longer times in refuge, thus blocking availability of safe accommodation for other women and children. This makes good quality, affordable, rented housing very much a gender issue.

Housing associations have been allocated taxpayers money to build and renovate homes and have been allowed to raise additional borrowing for investment. At

the same time, local authorities have been prevented from investing in new build or care and repair through financial rules and resource starvation.

If debts can be written off when housing transfers then it's obviously possible to write them off for our Councils and allow them to invest in their housing stock.

The SFHA have said, "The social rented housing stock will continue to decrease; there will continue to be, as in recent years, at least three houses lost to the social rented sector for every house added."

I do not believe that any agenda extending the RTB, and underpinning stock transfer, can realistically realise the fundamental social need for good, affordable, rented housing. I do not believe that stock transfer is the right way to address the housing problems inherited from the Conservatives. I do not believe that stock transfer is the panacea it purports to be since private funding still has to be paid for, either out of higher rents or taxpayer's subsidy.

I believe that the future of public housing over the next decade is too important to be decided based on what looks like a quick fix alternative to public spending on council housing.

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time to change track

Phil McGarry

Many readers will recall that the Tories introduced the Railways Act of 1993. This in effect took the National Rail Network out of public control. The privatisation and fragmentation of the system was ultimately dismantled into approximately 100 different sections. Each piece being sold off to the Private Sector with Railtrack at its core. This resulted in the establishment of approximately 25 Train Operating Companies, 13 Maintenance and Infrastructure Companies together with a handful of Rail Freight Undertakings and the setting-up of the Rolling Stock Leasing Companies.

Figures demonstrate that the former British Rail was sold off by the Tories for £1.9bn. Yet two years later, it was valued on the Stock Exchange at £8bn. The amount of subsidies going into the pockets of the Shareholders makes disturbing reading. In the five years after privatisation, public subsidy for the Network increased dramatically. In 1993/94, the total subsidy was £1.121bn; in 1994/95 £2.16bn; and in 1995/96 £2.074bn. Yet since 1996, the payments in Net Dividends paid to Railtrack Shareholders since privatisation totals £572m and we in the Railway Trade Unions consider that Railtrack's pleas for £2bn to be injected into the system is in our view morally repugnant and offensive especially since the whole system was sold on the 'cheap'. The Railway Trade Unions have concluded that never has so much been given away for so little to so few and we recall that many managers who bought Rolling Stock Companies for example, saw an investment of approximately £100,000 apiece turned into £17m within a matter of months as they were sold off to the highest bidder.

Railtrack in 1999 was reported as making £1.3m per day for its Shareholders yet the question of the Automatic Train Protection System which could have prevented the Ladbroke Grove disaster is now deemed as being too expensive to install. First Great Western Trains which operated one of the units involved in the Ladbroke Grove disaster announced profits of £2m per week for the first six months of 1999 and yet the Tory Government said that the £700m to install the Automatic Train Protection System was too expensive to proceed and, of course, the current Government inherited that particular mess.

However, our present Government must look again at the situation and take corrective action. I recall John Prescott telling a Labour Party Conference in 1993 that he was making it crystal clear that any privatisation of

the Railway System that does take place will, on the arrival of a Labour Government, be quickly and effectively dealt with, and with the full support of the community be returned to Public Ownership. That commitment is as relevant today as it was then in 1993. It is our belief that the Government must honour its pledges when they were in opposition to bring the Industry back into Public Ownership. The Prime Minister, Tony Blair, continues to extol the virtues that his Government is a 'Listening Government'. During the fuel blockade of last year he said "We get the message".

The message from the electorate of the country is quite clear. In 1999, a poll conducted by the Guardian Newspaper uncovered that 73 per cent of those polled favoured Re-nationalisation.

The same newspaper conducted a further ICM Poll just recently and the figure now stands at 76 per cent with 71 per cent of Tory voters in favour. In Scotland, the System Three Poll by the Herald on the 15th of January 2001 also revealed that 66 per cent of those polled favour the Railways to be Re-nationalised with 15 per cent saying that Railtrack should be brought back under Public Ownership and control with 9 per cent favouring the status quo. Overall, three quarters of the citizens of this country want the Railways Network brought back into Public Ownership. This position has the support of over one hundred cross party MPs who signed an Early Day Motion for this to occur.

Obviously, shareholders profit substantially while the services continue to decline and this cannot be allowed to continue. We believe that the Campaign to restore Railtrack to Public Ownership would be the first step towards bringing the whole of the Railway Industry back into the Public Sector and this is a popular move which has the support of environmental and community groups together with politicians and action groups who lost loved ones arising out of the tragic accidents at Ladbroke Grove, Southall and Hatfield.

The commitment of the Government as far as their ten-year plan is concerned tells us that £60bn will be injected into the Rail Network over the next ten years. £26bn will come as Public Subsidy whilst £34bn will come from the Private Sector. This therefore implies that further PFI/PPP Schemes will surely follow. Everyone knows that this is a discredited policy and is not cost effective in the long

Never has so much been given away for so little to so few

run. Robert Kilay, the appointed Traffic Commissioner for London, highlighted his concerns when he produced his preliminary report for the Mayor of London, Ken Livingstone. Over the Privatisation of London Underground he said, "the basic structure of the PPP is totally flawed and is not an effective way to restore the London Underground to a state of good repair, and it will not promote an improvement in the service being offered to Londoners". He concluded that the "Consortia would be back for more money, more time, and then even more money, and because the trains must run, the Government will inevitably pay".

If the political will was there, the Department of Transport and the Environment could come up with innovative ways to ensure we had a publicly owned, publicly accountable system, answerable to Ministers, with an independent role for the Rail Regulator to give the Railways the leadership and direction it needs. This would lead to a safer, more reliable and punctual service. Safety would therefore not be compromised in the quest for profits. Taxpayers have every right to ensure that their money be used for the legitimate purpose of improving services and safety. Economists argue that the Government could come up with a formula to have a controlling stake in the Railway Industry and perhaps commit itself to buying 51 per cent through Government Bonds which would bind any future Government for years to come. The cost of buying up every share in Railtrack would be around £5bn but if a 51 per cent stake was required of the Government, it would obviously be half that sum. This would be the equivalent of three Millennium Domes and some would argue money well spent. The privateers who obtained these gains should only get back the actual price they paid for it in the first place.

Stuart Francis, Chair of the Rail Passengers' Committee (RPC), the Government body set up to represent passengers' interests, had this to say; "Four years after the start of privatisation and after all the time, effort, money and promises, we still have a system performing no better than when the whole process started; indeed in many areas it is performing worse. It is becoming ever clearer that on top of private money substantial amounts of public money need to be spent to bring about real improvements and to create a truly

integrated public transport system with rail at its core. Quality transport cannot be brought cheaply". The observations from the National Audit Office Report of April 2000 criticises the performance regime of Railtrack, despite enormous subsidies:

"The taxpayer can accordingly be considered to be the indirect source of a significant proportion of Railtrack's income." (National Audit Office Report 2000, page 13)

Clearly there is an economical and cogent argument for returning the Railways to Public Ownership. That's why the Railway Trade Unions have initiated the Campaign to Take Back the Track and to argue for Railtrack to be brought under Public Ownership with clear accountabilities purely as a first step to re-nationalising the whole Railway Industry. We are seeking the support of the General Public at large to raise public awareness and to focus on gaining and building on that support, especially and particularly amongst the Labour and Trade Union Movement, and to

The message from the electorate of the country is quite clear. In 1999, a poll conducted by the Guardian Newspaper uncovered that 73 per cent of those polled favoured re-nationalisation

tap in to the different Political Parties who support Public Ownership along with environmental organisations, passenger groups and community representatives. The Campaign has the clear support of the General Public at large. We believe that the Government should take heed of the wishes of the citizens of this country. Failure to do so would be political suicide and we in the Movement intend to make this a General Election issue whenever the Election is called by the Prime Minister. The madness of the last seven years has proved that we were right all along in trying to reverse the privatisation and fragmentation process. We believe that the only way to restore public confidence in our railways is to scrap

the discredited system and replace it with a policy of re-nationalisation and to bring the system back under Public Ownership with clear Public Accountabilities at its core. That, in our view, would be a General Election Winner. ■

constitutional changing

Andrew Richardson

In April 1946 George Orwell published his essay *Politics and the English Language*. 'If thought corrupts language,' he wrote, 'language can corrupt thought.' The doublespeak prevalent in today's political world of focus groups, spin doctors and lobbyists points to an absence of thought that would have fitted well into Orwell's world. Take the word 'socialist'. The word has passed into the political lexicon to be used as a term of abuse and insult. Mrs Thatcher invested the word 'socialist' with a venom much as Savonarola would have used the word 'devil' to castigate the medieval Florentines on their sinful ways. For her, a loyal and patriotic subject of the Crown could not be a socialist.

For those not afraid to use the word, 'socialism' means essentially 'social justice'. To counteract the baneful Thatcherite legacy, still extant at Westminster, socialism will appeal to the mass of the Scottish people only if it is presented as a programme for social justice. The argument proposed here is that the main obstacle, albeit not the only one, to a resurgence of real 'socialism' in Scotland is not the Tory party, nor New Labour but the British State.

A number of people in Scotland, mainly among the older section of the population, those of the wartime and immediate postwar generations, and those who served in the British armed forces, tend to express their faith in Britain. They are proud to be British. Their reasons vary. Britain enjoys strong ties binding its people together, namely, a common history, language and culture. The Westminster Parliament, cited as the mother of all parliaments, leads the world in democratic governance, in freedom of thought and expression and in its well-ordered and impartial civil service. These sentiments are very real, genuinely and sincerely held, albeit occasionally expressed, notably in Britain's foreign owned tabloid press, in a nostalgic, chauvanistic and sentimental way

Many of the younger generation of Scots, however, do not share such sentiments and do not feel similar ties of loyalty to the British State. They believe that the time has come for a new vision of Scotland, of a Scotland that governs itself. For them, the Westminster parliament has singularly failed Scotland. John Swinney has articulated this in an interview with **The Observer** (17.09.00):

"If the UK Parliament was a great success for Scotland we wouldn't need this (i.e. Scottish) Parliament."

An analysis of the all the key indices, economic, social and administrative, points to the inexorable conclusion

that, during the past half century, the governance of the British State has been a notable failure. Scotland, as an integral part of Britain, has been part of that failure. Britain has become a millstone around Scotland's neck.

Unlike many other European states such as Germany, France, Holland, Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Finland, which still have strong industrial and/or manufacturing bases, the Tory-Labour legacy is that Britain has now become a 'service' industrial country. History is repeating itself. William the Conqueror's Domesday Survey of 1086 revealed a strictly ordered society in which the ladder of privilege, rank, status, wealth, power and subservience was clearly defined. The relationship between the powerful few and the masses they governed was summed up by the simple word 'servus', giving rise to the word serf. It was, in a word, a 'service' society.

A half-century's catastrophic decline in British industry and manufacture has affected Scotland disproportionately more than the rest of Britain. In the past two decades Scotland has seen the total loss of the its mining industry, its steel making capacity, its shipbuilding and heavy engineering, the collapse of its farming and the massive scaling down of its fishing industry. In tandem with this decline came the emasculation of local government, the sell-off of national assets at well below their true market value and now the disastrous Private Finance Initiative. Scotland under British tutelage has become, par excellence, the 'service' state.

The social consequences of Thatcherite policies are nowhere starker than the fact that Scotland, an oil rich country, has a greater proportion of its population living on welfare benefit, a larger amount of substandard public housing than in any other region in the European Union outside some parts of Italy's Mezzogiomo and parts of Greece and Portugal. Some 38 per cent of Scottish children are officially living in poverty. The percentage for Norway is 2.8 per cent. There is still an unacceptable degree of poverty in rural areas, where poor housing and low pay obtain. Despite its great natural wealth, Scotland is, with regard to most economic indices, poor compared to Finland, Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Switzerland, countries with relatively similar populations.

The necessary interests of Scotland's people will be subservient as long as Scotland is governed in the interests of the British State. What, then, are the interests of the British State? Primarily, Britain's economic and tax policies are, as they have always been, dictated by

the powerful financial institutions of the City of London which still prides itself on being 'banker' to the world. Unfortunately, unlike that other world banking centre, Zurich, whose wealth stays in Switzerland, London's wealth now flows mainly overseas to the U.S., Germany, and Switzerland. This is because the greater part of the capital base in London is now foreign owned (British capital being a relatively small part of that capital base) and its exported profits are untaxed.

The fundamental economic, social, foreign, and defence decisions for Scotland as part of the British state are taken in Whitehall. Taking the British economy as a paradigm, the decisions are made by the Treasury. Scotland gets a block grant, not unlike an English county council, and that grant is dictated by the Treasury. The devolved Scottish parliament and its attendant civil servants at the renamed Scotland Office merely carve up the block grant. Scotland with a population of five million has only a block grant of some £15 billion (fiscal year 1999) to cover all its needs. Denmark with a smaller population has a national revenue of some £59 billion. Even if a relative part of the UK budget for defence, health and social security were factored in, adding say another £10 billion, it would still be less than a half of Denmark's revenues.

The central problem facing Britain today is its antiquated unwritten constitution. Unique among Western democratic states, the structure of the British State is, in part, undemocratic: inter alia, a wholly unelected House of Lords, wielding considerable legislative powers; numerous quangos and government agencies, unelected and unaccountable, much of whose work is done in secret but who handle a larger amount of the national budget than all the English county councils put together.

Then there is the enduring myth about Britain's Civil Service, assiduously fostered by the Civil Service itself. There are about 4,000 or so senior civil servants of Principal grade and above in Whitehall who plan policy and, de facto, govern Britain. They form a very powerful and influential group; more powerful and influential in many instances than the elected government itself. Sir Humphrey is still very much alive in the corridors of Whitehall. Twenty years ago, Peter Kellner, in his book

The Civil Service, An Inquiry into Britain's Ruling Class wrote (p.300)

"Whitehall's mandarins have helped inflict, and now defend this malaise (i.e. of a failing Britain) and call it good government."

This tightly-knit administrative mafia is kept impregnable behind the high citadel walls of Whitehall by an ingrained culture of secrecy. The British Civil Service is a supreme example of effective power without responsibility and with complete freedom from criticism. The doubting of administrative decisions taken in Whitehall is seen as akin to treason. The self-inflicted BSE catastrophe with its deadly consequence, VCJD, and the Arms to Iraq treachery, are among the many disasters allowed to occur by the Whitehall culture of secrecy and which have cost the British and, ipso facto, the Scottish taxpayers billions of pounds.

To bring about change in the structure of the way Britain is governed, namely institutional modernisation, would demand a root and branch reform of the constitution, namely, the introduction of a written constitution setting out the rights of the citizen, the abolition of the unelected

The Left in Scotland has been brainwashed over the past 80 years into thinking that a British Labour Party would be more likely to deliver a programme of socialism than any narrow 'national' party

House of Lords, the reform of the civil service, the abolition of unelected quangos and agencies and the return of their powers to elected accountable bodies and a serious reform of the powers of the Crown. Such a programme of reform will not take place under any foreseeable Labour government and certainly not any Tory government. If Scotland is not to continue to suffer the ills inflicted on it by a largely uncaring established elite in Westminster and Whitehall, whose retained powers still firmly outstrip the devolved powers, then it must seek to take its own affairs in to its own hands.

The Left in Scotland has been brainwashed over the past 80 years into thinking that a British Labour Party would be more likely to deliver a programme of socialism, i.e. of social justice, than any narrow 'national' party. True, the Labour government of 1945 introduced the Welfare State and the National Health Service. Both of these are now under serious siege. Their demise is part of a none-too secret political agenda on the part of both New Labour and Conservative Parties.

The national parties that govern Finland, Norway, Denmark, Sweden and Switzerland have been able to provide for their public interest very much better than the British state has ever done for the Scottish people. For example, Norway did not allow the revenues from its oil riches to be frittered away. Instead it set up a special fund to be used for the public interest of the Norwegian people for generations to come. The North Sea oil revenues accruing to the British Treasury have been squandered over the past two decades. They were never saved in any way but were used for purposes other than the public interest. Without the large windfall of Scottish oil revenues, the Tories would not have been able, crucially, to finance the massive redundancies that followed the deliberate collapse of industry and the privatisation of state owned assets, mainly for the benefit of the financial institutions predominant in the City.

If there is to be any future for the Left in Scotland, it must weigh up the present possibilities. Being part of a British Labour Party, especially one that has moved significantly to the right, is not the solution. The fact is that the

British State, with its now highly centralised executive power, its weakened Parliament, its inappropriate feudal constitution, its outdated prerogative powers of the Crown, its grossly inflated Civil List, its anachronistic monarchy, upholding an unacceptable sectarian Succession, its socially corrosive class structure of privilege, rank and status, dependent on a corrupt honours system, its fawning subservience to the powerful and vested interests of the City, its unwarranted and expensive pretention as a global power, its wasteful expenditure on vain military ambitions, its woeful neglect of the real public interest, has signally failed the British people.

More importantly, the British State has failed the people of Scotland. For the people of England there appears no solution. The Scottish people do have a choice. It is called independence. If the Left in Scotland is not to suffer a fate similar to that which befell the Liberal Party in 1921, then it must make common cause with the Scottish Nationalist Party. If it does not, the Scottish people will seal its fate. ■

web review

Henry McCubbin

This edition I would like to draw readers' attention to our own links page. Our policy is to provide links to like-minded web sites run by like-minded groups. For instance we have linked to Red Pepper a London based magazine of the left, which covers a range of topics frequently of a more metropolitan nature, than SLR and also including articles on international issues. Some contributors can be identified with the old Marxism Today but to read their contributions now you will notice that they have left that behind. What behind? Well we used to call it revisionism. Certainly its support for Ken Livingston and the left/green slate in the London Mayoral and assembly elections firmly anchored it to progressive causes and against new Labour's neo liberalism.

Spokesman books is an old favourite of the left. Based in the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation and with a history of activity in workers control (remember that?) and European CND it has a fine left pedigree. Spokesman's concentration on international affairs complements in many ways the work of SLR. With regular contributions from Chomsky and Ken Coates it is well written as well as pungent in its criticism of the new world order.

Catalyst is a new group chaired by that rabid left winger Roy Hattersley well, relative to the right-wing nostrums of the Rev Tony Blair doesn't he look radical. More power to his elbow with this enterprise. It contains many thoughtful contributions by well known figures on the left. Some of whom would have been shocked until recent times to have been so-described. These articles can contain good source material for use in the ideological struggle to win back a left consensus. I only wonder why Roy Hattersley allowed Kinnock to dismantle the Labour Party's internal democracy because not only did it do in any opportunity for the left to organise, it did in the opportunity for anyone apart from the Rev. Tony's junior clergy to organise.

Our link selection also contains links to political information and the links to those who have kindly advertised with us. We will of course continue to expand our list so if you have any suggestions please e-mail them to us at slr@dircon.co.uk. ■

There is a scourge in our society which is destroying the lives of families all over Scotland, turning family member against family member and dividing communities. The cost to Scotland is enormous. Decent, ordinary people are haunted by fear and are made afraid to speak out in public by small-time fat-cats making fortunes out of the suffering of others. But it is time to stand up against these people and reclaim our streets. You can play your part in saying NO! by joining our protest march and carrying a banner with the face of a victim of this plague. So, if you are gay, an asylum seeker, unmarried or any other victim of the profit-mongering tabloid press, call us and show your solidarity. (All protesters will receive £10. No-shows will be vilified).

Of course, I am being frivolous and have to admit that the Daily Record's march against drugs had a very real and very serious purpose. And if we can all keep the good work up I am sure that we can see the value of the Trinity Group shares and the Record's circulation figures climb higher still.

But the cover story, as far as I can make out, was that the Broken Record was to help create a sense of solidarity among those who live with the problems of drugs. The argument is that if people can be made to feel that they have the support of their communities they will have the courage to 'shop' their local dealer and thereby bringing down most of the Colombian drug cartels. Heady stuff indeed, and a tactic which might usefully be widened out to help with other crises. For example, could we not have a Foot and Mouth March, encouraging sheep to 'shop' other sheep they suspect of having the symptoms. ("Get me the Record - Larry looks a bit peaky".) Just by organising a lengthy line of sheep following one another (not tricky to organise) around Glasgow carrying adverts for newspapers we could save all that bloodshed.

And the Daily Record 'shop a dealer' hotline has been doing great trade - four Lib Dem backbenchers have already been fingered. Good to see Tom McCabe maintaining his usual conscientious approach.

The idea of a hotline which you can call and incriminate people has interesting possibilities. But, as usual, those at Labour's Millbank headquarters are way ahead. They have devised a hotline you can call and unwittingly incriminate yourself. The surreptitious purpose of the Labour Party's Delegate Support Office was recently revealed by former National Executive Committee member Liz Davies in The Guardian. Rather than existing to help nervous delegates prepare for their contributions to debate, the DSO was actually there to catch out anyone who had intended to think for themselves. Anyone challenging the New Labour line was marked with ultraviolet dye and, with the



help of special lighting in the main hall, was assiduously not called to speak. (I may have made up the dye part). Meanwhile, the rest were handed cards with things to say in support of the leadership on them (I saw one on which the only thing written was a cue for a sort of 'cooing' noise). Which all helped to explain the predicament of a close friend who's first recollection after explaining to the nice woman in the Inverness conference office that she

wasn't convinced about housing stock transfer was waking up under a pile of dead sheep in a disused quarry in Cumbria

I myself enjoyed the Inverness conference primarily for the social side. And can I take my hat off to the Bar Support Office who neatly steered me away from my initial choice of a pint of Tartan Special by supplying me with a card with the text "A glass of sparkling mineral water please".

The Tartan Special was much more appropriate for my recent Hampden visit. It was the usual story, a genuinely promising performance which looked like it was going to prove the breakthrough needed. The neutral observer would have put them as the underdogs, but while there was a distinct lack of world-class figures, guts and determination made up for shortcomings in ability. And it almost worked out. They were in it right until the end when a sudden vicious and unprovoked attack on someone who couldn't defend themselves properly snatched defeat from the jaws of victory, and the fans were left to crawl out of the National Stadium demoralised again. If I heard one person mumbling "F***** Winnie Ewing, why can't she keep her mouth shut" I must have heard dozens. Heartbreak.

So what have we learned today? The Daily Record would sell its granny for a fiver, New Labour has an inbuilt paranoia rivalled only by my cousin Eric who is being pursued by aliens intent in extracting his saliva glands, and the SNP are having difficulty in bringing their foot in mouth disease under control. So nothing, basically.

Which is why I want to leave you with news of the revolution which is emerging from that bastion of the establishment, George Watson's Academy, Edinburgh. You will probably know that Wendy Alexander has recently offered working-class school kids a forty-quid bung if they stay on at school with the aim of getting more of them into university. Frank Gerstenburg, the Principal of George Watson's, has taken issue with this move. In a recent Daily Mail article he points out that, in actual fact, staying on and completing your education is not the right choice for everyone. In his considered view, the right option for many children is, in fact, to "get out and get on with it". After all, finding a job as quickly as possible is the best course for some pupils. Which is why he is sending a memo round the school highlighting the attractions of a career in McDonalds to the Farquhars, Camerons and Torcuils. Although I have also heard rumour of another memo circulating which suggests he is to change the timetable for the upper sixth, replacing double maths with double standards.

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The National Union of Rail Maritime and Transport Workers

The Scottish Regional Council of the RMT welcomes the establishment of the newly formed 'Scottish Left Review' and supports the declaration by its Editorial Committee.

We believe a forum of this nature is long overdue and we congratulate the founder members for taking the initiative. We are proud to be associated with the 'Review' and wish it every success for the future.

The RMT argues support for its policy objectives and argues for:-

1. The return of our Railways to Public Ownership.
2. The repeal of all the Anti-Union Laws and to replace them with fairer laws which enshrine ILO conventions 87 and 98.
3. To oppose the concept of Public Finance Initiative and Public Private Partnership projects.
4. To keep Caledonian MacBrayne in the Public Sector and oppose any plans to privatise our Ferry Services.
5. To support the International Transport Federations campaign against 'Flags of Convenience'.

John Milligan
President

Phil McGarry & Stevet Todd
Regional Organisers

Jim Gray
Secretary