

**CAN'T WE
ALL JUST GET
ALONG?**

**LEFT
UNITY IN
SCOTLAND**



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Comment

The beginning point for all political discussion should be to dismiss the ridiculous idea that there is no 'right' or 'left' in politics. These are not outmoded terms and neither Tony Blair or anyone else can change the reality of how power, wealth and people are interconnected through the repetition of platitudes. It is not true to say that there is no necessary contradiction between the policies of the left and the right. It is not true to say that increasing inequality by encouraging wealth concentration is reconcilable with ending poverty – you can sit in all the TV studios you want and you can give any variation of the Thatcherite message of 'trickle-down' but it won't change the facts on the ground. You either increase inequality or you decrease it and poverty is always associated with inequality. There is no economy where concentrating wealth in the hands of the already wealthy has dragged the rest up towards their level. The more resource and power you give someone, the more they will use that wealth and power to protect and increase their wealth and power. Some things remain 'true' and some things remain 'false' – and this holds even in the relativistic world of elected politics.

What is not always so easy is to identify just how 'left' something is or how 'right'. For example, it is generally taken to be the case that socially progressive environmentalists oppose nuclear power, but it is possible to make a case for nuclear power which is built on environmental concerns. It is also unfortunate that this complexity besets the left much more than the right, but then this is an unavoidable outcome of the fact that the world in which we live has been structured for the (economic) right and so there isn't all that much for them to disagree about (the religious and moral 'right' are every bit as divided as the left, which is why no-one is quite sure who is the front runner for the Republican presidential nomination). If people want something to stay more-or-less the same they will all share more-or-less the same viewpoint; if people want something to change it can change in many different ways.

And so we find ourselves in Scotland in 2008 and a room with five people from the left could easily have five different opinions

on whether Scotland is now moving in a better direction. The Labour left is caught knowing that the SNP is implementing traditional Labour policies but also see them introducing New Labour policies too. What do you criticise? The SNP left can make all the accommodations it likes, but it knows that money spent cutting business taxes is money spent prolonging Thatcher's shadow over Scotland. Those from the smaller left parties will note that the SNP's proposals for changing PFI do not move as far from private ownership and management as they should. So should they be opposed, even if they are a bit of an improvement? Is it pragmatic left politics or unprincipled fake-left politics?

All of these questions crop up in the different articles in this issue. But they should still take us back to our starting point – there may be debate about the margins, but there **is** a left and there **is** a right, and they can be differentiated. Scotland presents many strategic possibilities for the left, and there are therefore a number of possible approaches to the next three years. Some feel the mental independence of a Government no longer run from London makes up for some of that Government's populist policy-making, others feel that with no left parties to keep them under pressure the outlook is less positive. Some in Labour hope the new realities of Scottish politics will help the party regain its soul. And there are a host of debates about the ground between the environmentalist left and the redistributionist left.

But there is a definite right and there is a definite left and Scotland will move in one direction or the other. We can debate and argue all we like (and we certainly like to debate and argue). What is not OK is to lose sight of the start points and end points. There is right and left, and there are many of us who cannot rest easy until our world moves to the left. If this cannot bring us together over personal, partisan and picky differences, then we m

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unity is possible - look at Europe...

Gregor Gall argues that it is time the Scottish left began to think about how it can work together again. To find ways forward he looks at examples from across Europe which he argues provide hope that progress is possible.

The radical left unity projects in Scotland (the SSP) and England (Respect) made small but significant electoral breakthroughs between 2003 and 2005. However, their implosion in the last two years as result of internal disputes and splits has cast doubt on whether the radical left can ever move away from its **Life of Brian** depiction of incessant hair-splitting on questions of political purity, much less exercise any influence on the political process. However, the objective conditions of hegemonic neo-liberalism, continuing imperialism and the decomposition of social democracy demand that the idea of a radical left unity projects is not jettisoned for reasons of any short-term difficulties. For the radical left, in these aforementioned conditions, to be a credible option for a growing body of disillusioned and progressive opinion, unity and cooperation amongst itself are vital. Uniting the radical left together is not just about making one new alliance or organisation the sum of its constituent parts so that it is not divided, important though that is. Rather, it is about making the new organisation more than the sum of its parts. Therefore, unity can help prefigure growth of members and influence through pooling resources, pushing in the same direction, working to common priorities and being more credible to wider social movements and the like.

Unity can take different forms. The basic form is working together in genuine, full and trusting ways in campaigns, while the higher forms involve electoral alliances and organisational fusions. Joint-working or electoral alliances may be the prefigurative basis for subsequent organisational fusion. For any of these forms of collective working to be possible, respect and tolerance of differences are vital while differences must also be discussed constructively. Unity must be achieved on the foundation of openly discussing and resolving differences for 'paper' unity will dissolve when strong differences emerge. But the basis of collective working together in the same electoral alliances and party organisations must be that overwhelming consensus on the grand political questions of our age amongst the radical left forms the bedrock of a common ideology for radical left unity, from which questions of how to operate are secondary and subject to fraternal discussion and debate. This has often been described as the '80:20 equation', where the 20 per cent of disagreement is not allowed to get in the way of agreement and action on the 80 per cent of issues where there is common ground and consensus. Consequently, to facilitate agreement (the 80 per cent) and fraternal discussion (on the 20 per cent), radical left projects must be characterised by pluralism, openness and relative broadness, with some degree of interim internal autonomy to the pre-merger constituent parts.

Mindful of this, this article presents short, thumb nail sketches of the radical left unity projects in continental Europe before making some preliminary conclusions about what they can teach us in Scotland and Britain. It should not be assumed that

all radical and far left groups and parties in each of the countries covered are involved in the radical left unity projects outlined below. Indeed, the communist parties with sizeable numbers of elected representatives still exist in Portugal, France, Italy and Greece outside radical left unity projects and here both radical left unity projects and sizeable communist parties exist alongside a plethora of other assorted leftists groups. Even outside the radical left unity projects - where they exist - other left and progressive groups and forces exist so the unity projects are not 'finished products'. And in Belgium and Sweden, long-existing left parties predominate so there have been no radical left unity projects. Nonetheless, the following survey gives some idea of what happened, when and why. Readers are urged to use the free encyclopedia, Wikipedia (wikipedia.org), to learn more about these projects and their components part by typing in the name of each country, finding the section on politics, then political parties. From here, there are entries and links to the various organisations' own websites (some of which are in English).

Denmark

The Red-Green Alliance was formed as an electoral alliance in 1989 by three leftwing parties (left social democrats, communists and Trotskyists) with Maoists joining in 1991. The Alliance then developed into an independent party based on individual membership, with the founding parties having no official influence and a majority of members not having had a past in one of the founding organisations parties. It then gained parliamentary representation in 1994, having six MPs (three per cent vote) in the 2005 elections and four MPs (two per cent) in the 2007 elections.

Finland

The Left Alliance is a green socialist party, formed from the merger of the People's Democratic League, the Women's Democratic League, and the Communist Party in 1990. Given the different political persuasions, divisions have been common with defections to the social democrats and the forming of a new communist party. Electoral performance has ranged from 17 to 23 MPs (nine per cent-11 per cent) for the parliament to 1,000 to 1,300 councillors (10 per cent-12 per cent vote) and one to two MEPs (nine to 10 per cent vote).

France

In addition to the Communist Party, there are three Trotskyist parties, of which the larger two (Lutte Ouvrière and Ligue Communiste Revolutionnaire (LCR)) have jointly worked together on a sporadic basis in the electoral arena (regional, presidential, European). However, their enmity towards each other is also marked although the LCR has recently made a call for a broader, anti-capitalist party to be created. It remains to

be seen what the reactions of the other two Trotskyist parties, Communist Party and social movements are to this.

Greece

The Coalition of the Left of Movements and Ecology is commonly known as Synaspismos or SYN. Until 2003, it was called the Coalition of the Left and Progress and is a major component of the parliamentary Coalition of the Radical Left (SYRIZA). SYN emerged initially as an electoral coalition in the late 1980s, with two communist parties being its largest constituents, and securing over 10 per cent of the vote in parliamentary elections and a substantial number of MPs. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the coalition moved to become a party in 1991. Electoral fortunes were mixed in the early to mid-1990s but parliamentary representation was secured (10 MPs in 1996 on five per cent vote, two MEPs in 1999 on five per cent vote). In elections in 2000, SYN was supported by left ecologists, gaining just over three per cent of the vote and six MPs. In parliamentary elections of 2004, SYN together with several smaller left and left ecologists parties formed SYRIZA alliance. The alliance with the smaller parties was formed again at the end of 2005, providing a firm basis the 14 MPs gained on a five per cent vote in the 2007 parliamentary elections, which makes SYN the fourth biggest party. SYN also has many councillors, being the third biggest party in local government, and a sizable, semi-autonomous youth wing. SYN aspires to be an 'umbrella', where people of varying left ideological and theoretical backgrounds can find a natural home. Therefore, SYN members are encouraged to form and participate in internal platforms which mount open discussions and publish magazines, but may not work against party policy. These platforms are invited to put forward theses on party policy and strategy at triennial congresses.

SYRIZA's genesis arose in a forum of the radical left in 2001 called the Space of Left Dialogue and Common Action, which in turn led to an electoral alliance for the 2002 local elections, and provided the basis for its formal establishment in 2004. However after the 2004 election, the smaller parties accused SYN of not honouring an agreement to have one of its MPs resign so a member of one of the smaller parties could take the seat. This crisis led SYN to run independently from the rest of the Coalition for the 2004 European elections but later in that year SYN returned to SYRIZA. By 2007, several new radical left and green organisations joined SYRIZA, helping it secure its breakthrough.

Germany

The important development of Die Linke, fusing together the former PDS, a breakaway section from the social democrats (SPD) and various far left groups is an important development. It is amply analysed in Victor Grossman's article in this edition of the magazine. Suffice it to note The Left has polled eight to 13 per cent, is the only left party in Parliament (unless one still views the SPD and the Greens as left-of-centre) and has become the strongest of the oppositional parties. The German Communist Party (DKP), the traditional party of the left in western Germany, retains some roots among

some workers and students. Although often critical of the Left, it supports The Left in elections and has friendly ties to that party's Communist Platform. The newer Communist Party of Germany (KPF) also has some such ties but rarely supports The Left. There are also smaller Maoist and Trotskyist parties or groups, very visible at demonstrations, as well as ecological and immigrant groups and the anti-globalisation Attac.

Italy

In 1991, when the Italian Communist Party became the Democratic Party of the Left (PDS), dissidents founded Communist Refoundation (PRC) as a party to unite all communists. It was joined by Proletarian Democracy, a Trotskyist party. PRC was led by Fausto Bertinotti, a long-time CGIL union leader (from 1994-2006), helping it achieve nine per cent in the 1996 election. The party's MPs supported and then opposed the Olive Tree centre-left coalition leading to its fall and a split in PRC with the setting up of the Party of Italian Communists. In 2004, PRC joined the centre-left opposition, The Union, entering government when it won power in 2006. The decision to participate in the coalition government, particularly in light of the government's policy on Afghanistan and Lebanon, attracted much criticism. Internally, the PRC has recognised tendencies



'Being Communists', Critical Left (which quit in 2007) and the Communist Project (which quit in 2006). PRC has around 70 MPs currently based on gaining seven per cent votes.

Luxembourg

The Left was formed in 1999 by activists from existing political parties (communist, New Left, Revolutionary Socialist Party and Socialist Workers' Party) and won three per cent vote and one MP in that year. But a dispute between the communists and the majority of the Left led to both running separately in the 2004 elections, with the Left losing its MP.

Netherlands

Although the Socialist Party (originating from a Maoist communist party in 1972) is currently larger in parliamentary terms, GreenLeft is a larger extra-parliamentary organisation. It began life as an alliance of four parties (communists, socialists, greens and Christians). Initially, it had 16 MPs in 1972 but this fell to six in 1977, precipitating further cooperation albeit of an uneven outcome involving splits from each party and leading to a situation where only two of the four parties had just three MPs between them by 1986. This increased the pressure for full fusion, particularly from unions and environmentalists. In 1989, an interim organisation was formed for the 1989 European elections, leading to the creation of GreenLeft in 1990 as a party and the dissolution of the four former parties. Again this precipitated splits, leading to the formation of splinter groups. Political unity was slowly fashioned out of diverse opinion, although divisions remained over issues of Kosovo, Afghanistan and individual freedom. Between 1990 and 2007, GreenLeft has had between nine and 19 MPs, one and four MEPs, 50-odd members of provincial legislatures and tens of other elected position in local government.

Norway

The Socialist Left Party was founded in 1975 although it began life in 1973 as the Socialist Electoral League (SEL), an alliance of the Socialist People's Party, Communist Party of Norway, Democratic Socialists and independent Socialists following the victory for the 'No' campaign in the European Community referendum of 1972. In the 1973 elections, the SEL achieved an 11 per cent vote and 16 MPs. However, as SEL moved to become a party with its constituent parties disbanding, the Communist Party left, and it was not until the late 1980s that its first level of electoral success was repeated. In 2005, with nine per cent vote and 15 MPs it joined the centre-left Red-Green government coalition. Meanwhile, the Red Electoral Alliance (REA) was founded in 1973 as an election front for the Maoist communist party, becoming its own independent party in 1991. From 1993 to 1997, REA had one MP but despite recording its highest ever vote (two per cent), it lost its seat and failed to regain it in 2005 with a lower vote (one per cent) although it maintained around 60 councillors. This retrenchment led in 2007 to a fusion with the Maoist communist party to form Red.

Portugal

Left Bloc (Bloco de Esquerda, LB) was founded in 1999 from a number of far-left parties from Maoist, Trotskyist and communist backgrounds. All of these parties had stood in elections and became currents within the LB. Initially developed as a coalition, the LB has since become a party while its

constituent components have maintained their existence and some levels of autonomy, leading to a loose structure. This structure may also provide an umbrella for other interested socialist organisations. In 1999, the LB polled two per cent in the Portuguese parliamentary election with this rising to three per cent in 2002. These results were generally better than the collective results of its predecessor components. In 2005, the LB achieved a breakthrough with 6.5 per cent and eight MPs. It also has one MEP and many local councillors, making it Portugal's fifth biggest party. The LB's presidential candidate in 2006 received 288,224 votes (five per cent). With support from students and unions in particular, the LB is becoming to be seen as a credible left alternative to the older, more established communist party and the more centre-left socialist party because it has become a pole of attraction for many involved in various social movements. The BL proposed Portugal's first law on domestic violence, which was passed in parliament with the support of the socialist party.

Portugal is unusual in that it has another radical left unity project, the Unitarian Democratic Coalition (UDC), consisting of the Communist Party, the Ecologist Party and Democratic Intervention. The coalition was formed in 1987 to run in the simultaneous national and European parliamentary elections, and in every election since these parties have stood together at the UDC, even though the Communist Party is the major element within it. Tensions are minimalised by the sharing out of lead candidatures. Since 1987 the UDC has had in: the national parliament between 12 and 31 MPs (eight to 12 per cent vote); local government in excess of 200 councillors (11 to 13 per cent vote); and the European Parliament two to four MEPs (nine per cent to 14 per cent vote).

Spain

United Left (Izquierda Unida) was formed as a political coalition in 1986 during the mobilisations against NATO by several groups of leftists, greens, left-wing socialists and republicans but was always dominated by the Communist Party. After the electoral decline of the Communist Party in 1982 (from 10 per cent to three per cent), the UL slowly improved its electoral results reaching nine per cent in 1993 (1.8 million votes) and 11 per cent in 1996 (2.6m votes). From 1999, it went into decline, with its support slipping to five per cent in 2000. In that election it signed a pact with the Socialist Party. Following the tradition of the Spanish left, the UL does not have an organisation in Catalonia. Until 1998, UL's counterpart in Catalonia was Iniciativa per Catalunya (IC-V). But IC-V moved towards the centre, and broke relations with the UL, leading the UL to set up its own organisation in Catalonia, Esquerra Unida i Alternativa (EUiA). In 2004, UL ran with IC-V, achieving five per cent and five MPs. UL has around 70,000 activists and more than 2,500 councillors. Founded in 1995, Alternative Space is a political organisation from a Trotskyist tradition but draws on anti-capitalist, feminist and ecologist perspectives following the different currents that formed it. It operates as a current with UL but is also an autonomous organisation and most of its members do not belong to this coalition.

Switzerland

In Switzerland, the radical left consists of three groups (Alternative List, Solidarites, Swiss Party of Labour) which have a smattering between them of elected representatives at the

various levels. However, they worked together in coalitions when standing for elections in 2005 (as Left Alliance) and 2007 (as À gauche toute! Genève).

Lessons for the Scottish and British radical left

This brief cook's tour around the most significant western European radical left unity projects has a number of lessons:

- What seem like disparate groups can work and fuse together (although it is interesting to note that in nearly all instances they do not include members of sister organisations of the Socialist Party (ex-Militant) in Britain and where they include members of sister organisations of the British Socialist Workers' Party, these members have no significant influence on the radical left unity projects). Working together and, ultimately, fusing is often brought about by prior campaigning activities and joint electoral slates. Of course, while such fusion should be welcomed in itself, sometimes the underlying recognition is that individual parties have often ceased to be credible or influential players on their own so fusion is required to regain some kind of radical left critical mass.
- The degree of success for the radical left unity projects is sufficiently high that acquiring further knowledge about them, if not trying to emulate them, is desirable. This can be gauged by their presence in representative legislatures and membership numbers, particularly amongst members from formerly-aligned, non-aligned and independent backgrounds. However, success in attracting left members from social democratic, Labour-type parties has been less evident.
- Despite successes, radical left unity projects do suffer from ups and downs reflecting wider changes in society, struggle and consciousness - in other words, left unity does not guarantee inexorable upward momentum.

- Engaging in the electoral arena is vital but so is campaigning in extra-parliamentary terms outside elections (although this has been more difficult to show in this cook's tour). Indeed, it would be a strange notion to counter-pose the two - elections and campaigning - as at cross purposes with each other.
- Splits do take place, either as a result of deeply held policy differences or the reluctance to consent to the dissolution of an organisation upon fusing with others. However, fusion need not lead to this outcome depending on the process and nature of fusion. Seldom have splits come about because of entering government coalitions - this will remain the great test of these projects given that any government in the foreseeable future in any of the European countries is likely to be dominated by neo-liberal, bellicose parties.
- The history of radical left unity far pre-dates the watershed of the rise of the anti-globalisation and anti-war movements in the new millennium.
- Different 'models' exist of radical left unity and activists should look at which they think are most appropriate to their situation.
- Some Green/ecologist parties and organisations have been involved but this is far from standard practice and given an impending environmental catastrophe, opening up avenues to the left of the Green movement is an important future task for the radical left unity projects.

Clearly, a long way still has to be travelled until an alternative is built to the crumbling edifice of mainstream social democracy but these projects provide food for thought and for action.

Professor Gregor Gall is Professor of Industrial Relations at the University of Hertfordshire and author of 'The Political Economy of Scotland - Red Scotland? Radical Scotland' (University of Wales Press, 2005). He lives in Edinburgh. ■



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political earthquakes in the heart of europe

Victor Grossman explains how, beneath the mainstream media reporting of German politics, the really significant development is the emergence of a unified left party

Is that old spectre haunting Europe again? After years of shock or even paralysis in many leftist movements after the destruction of the supposed socialist bastion between East Berlin and Vladivostok, the European left, despite the usual splits and splinters, is showing signs of regrouping. While most media downplay such signs as dim rays of a setting sun, might they not be heralding a day of new hopes and tasks?

Germany, always of key importance in Europe, deserves particular attention. And it is here that a new party, Die Linke, or the Left, is changing the political landscape and playing a growing role in the European Left. The dramatic change was unexpected. German elections give voters one vote for a district candidate and one for a party slate. If a party gets over five per cent as a slate or elects three or more candidates directly it is represented proportionately in the Bundestag (German Parliament). Since Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS) got results vacillating just above or below the five per cent level, it had to rely on its East Berlin stronghold, where victories for several direct candidates seemed a guarantee that over thirty slate delegates (based on four to five per cent of the total vote) would get seats in the Bundestag. But then the map was redrawn and two PDS boroughs in East Berlin were merged with larger West Berlin districts, which resulted in only two direct candidates getting elected in 2002. Since it got only four per cent, only those two young women represented the party in the Bundestag. They were banished to the worst seats, deprived of caucus privileges, discriminated, mocked or ignored. It seemed the PDS might satisfy hostile predictions and disappear from national politics.

When the PDS was founded in 1989 from the ashes of the Socialist Unity Party (SED), which had ruled the German Democratic Republic, it abjured Stalinism, apologised for wrongs inflicted upon the people and charted a new democratic, pluralist course. But despite the apologies it took courage to back the PDS in an atmosphere recalling the American McCarthy era. But while unification (soon called annexation) brought a cornucopia of goods East Germans had yearned for, from bananas to Volkswagens and trips from Sydney to San Francisco, and replaced dull propaganda with bright if suffocating advertising, it did not bring everyone the 'blossoming landscapes' which then-German president Helmut Kohl had promised. GDR industry was largely eliminated, agriculture wrecked, thousands of 'Wessies' replaced East German professors, journalists, teachers, administrators, writers and cultural figures, while millions hunted - and hunt - for new jobs or

even trades. Things long taken for granted began wilting away. Medical treatment was more modern but hospitals, medicines, health aids, even visits to the doctor require payments. Child care became expensive, rents, municipal and rail fares, theatre tickets, book prices, hairdresser charges soared. Those with good jobs could afford them; others could barely make ends meet. Few would welcome a total return to GDR conditions, but many reflect on what was lost and resent brutal new 'reforms'.

This and PDS activity within their communities, from demanding less expensive nurseries to opposing a growing neo-Nazi menace, helped the PDS achieve between 15 and 30 per cent of the vote in the five eastern provinces, often pushing into second place ahead of either the Christian Democrats or the Social Democrats. But the PDS could make rarely win more than one or two per cent against anti-Communist, anti-GDR prejudices in the eleven western provinces. With an aging membership in the East, the party's future looked bleak. Both wings in the PDS blamed the other for its 2002 defeat; the left-wing said the party was not militant enough and hardly active out in the streets.

Meanwhile in western Germany some Social Democrats, angered by the way Gerhard Schroeder's SPD-Green coalition was hitting at the working class, the poor, the ill and the unemployed while giving one tax break after another to the wealthy and powerful, joined with trade unionists, disgusted at their leaders' unquestioning attachment to the SPD, and with small Trotskyist groups, to found a new organization, impressively titled Electoral Alternative for Jobs and Social Justice (WASG). Before long it landed a coup by gaining a prominent leader. Oskar Lafontaine, finance minister, chairman and top candidate of the SPD, had sensationally resigned all posts and even his Bundestag mandate in 1999 in protest at his party's direction. When the SPD-Green coalition unexpectedly dissolved itself in 2005 and new elections loomed, the WASG made a key decision, broke with past prejudices and joined with the largely eastern PDS in an electoral alliance which soon won



a fantastic 8.7 per cent of the entire German vote (and 18.5 per cent in Lafontaine's Saarland home province). The resulting 54 seats in the Bundestag were unprecedented for any party left of the SPD. 'In unity there is strength' again proved its reliability and euphoria swept through hitherto troubled PDS ranks. Then the two parties set about unifying permanently; after two years of meetings, congresses and membership referenda, equal congresses from both parties met in June 2007 in adjoining halls, then merged to form a party they officially named The Left.

Many problems remained. Some WASG members, especially in its sparse clubs in eastern provinces, feared inundation by the sheer organised weight of the PDS, with its 60,000 members, as against a WASG total of 11,500. Some East Germans, accustomed to time-worn thinking habits, feared the changes in a truly all-German party. Some on both sides worried about Oskar Lafontaine, who joined Lothar Bisky, PDS head, in chairing the new party and joined Gregor Gysi in heading its Bundestag caucus, thus becoming a top spokesperson for the party. For some in the East he was too militant, some in the West resented his long identification with the SPD. But I think most members rejoiced at Lafontaine's role. In refreshingly outspoken speeches he condemned German participation in military adventures, rejected privatisation of public utilities and housing, and went so far as to call for 'a change in the system', a goal the PDS always included in its name and programme but often neglected in its argumentation. Another big gain, I think, would be if the many union activists in the WASG correct the weak approach to working people by the PDS, with its closer ties to intellectual and white-collar circles.

An important problem concerns participation in coalition governments. In Mecklenburg-West Pomerania (north of Berlin) the PDS was junior member of a coalition with the SPD for one term full of conflicts and compromises. But after losing votes in an election, the SPD switched to a coalition with the Christian Democrats, as on the national level. A similar SPD-The Left coalition in the city-state of Berlin remains even more controversial. Five years of government with the SPD and its popular lord mayor Wowereit required many social welfare cuts to save Berlin from bankruptcy. The Left was blamed for them by its own East Berlin voters, who refrained en masse from going to the polls, resulting in a debacle. Left wingers in The Left, especially those in its Communist Platform group, called this strong evidence that alliances with the SPD were unprincipled if not suicidal.

The same question was raised nationally. What, ask some party leaders, if after the Bundestag elections in 2009 the SPD could win control through an alliance with both the Greens and The Left. Should we be so sectarian as to reject such a chance? But this is pure fantasy. Both Greens and SPD swear never to join with The Left, which to them still smells of the GDR and its ruling SED and still tolerates a small but vigorous Communist Platform fraction. To make things worse, Lafontaine had been a traitor to his old party and should not be trusted. But Lafontaine and other The Left leaders turn the cart around and say 'we will never join with an SPD which supports foreign wars, which raised the pension age from 65 to 67, sharply cut amounts given to the jobless, worsened the medical system but lowered taxes on corporations and the wealthy. It must first begin to change radically!' While some still mutter 'of course, but then again just imagine what we could accomplish!', the left wing warns that

a few seductive cabinet seats succeeded in taming the once-radical Greens.

There are other conflicts. Should Germany participate in UN peace-keeping missions? Despite official party rejection some say 'maybe'. Others reply 'how many UN missions have really helped to maintain peace? Haven't they enabled German military elements to regain overseas influence and experience despite restrictions in the constitution? German troops caused enough disaster in the past. Missions like patrolling Lebanese waters and reconnaissance planes hunting Afghani targets only increase geographic spread and aggressiveness.' Some The Left deputies at Strasbourg, while criticising parts of it, support the present European Union, though most members probably reject an agreement like that in Portugal, fearing it could repress social progress while strengthening the military wing of the EU.

A major dispute concerns the evaluation of the GDR. Some spokespeople join other parties and the media in repeatedly deploring GDR repression of the uprising in June 1953, building the Berlin Wall or actions of the security apparatus. The left-wing warns that while GDR repression deserves rejection, past conditions should be viewed objectively and in their Cold War context, while constant apologising, never abject enough for opponents, nourishes a growing tendency to equate the GDR with the Nazi state, so as to prevent any consideration of socialism as a future goal, but also dangerously lessening abhorrence to fascism. Finally, does The Left still aim at eventual nationalisation of major industry and finance under some form of democratic socialism, or simply strive to reform and humanise present big business control of the economy? Lafontaine's call to change the system was more than welcome to those favouring the former direction.

Regardless of differences, the very presence of The Left has caused political earthquakes. By surmounting the five percent hurdle to enter the legislature of Bremen, its first such success in western Germany, and with similar possibilities in January and February in Hesse, Hamburg and Lower Saxony, it caused the SPD, the Greens, and even some Christian Democrats to suddenly rediscover their heart for the workers. They plagiarised the hitherto repudiated demand by The Left for a minimum wage, the Greens surprisingly condemned sending soldiers to Afghanistan, SPD and Greens now demand improvements in their own draconic measures. The SPD feels compelled to block its haemorrhage to The Left and stress differences with the Christian Democrats, while not really endangering its coalition with them. Indeed, all political parties but the Free Democrats seem to be moving leftwards, at least in words and until the 2009 Bundestag elections. But The Left, so often forgotten by the media, can no longer be ignored. If it wins new positions in the West German provinces, there might be a whole new ball game. And, if it sticks to its principles, it can cause healthy waves in both Western and even Eastern Europe. ■

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news from the south

Andy Newman looks at the state of the left in England and concludes that much has to be done if any kind of unity is to be achieved

The last twelve months have been a defining period for the left in England. In September, John McDonnell MP wrote in the **Morning Star** (28 September 2007): "The left has the difficult task of accepting and explaining to others that the old routes into the exercise of power and influence involving internal Labour Party mobilisations and manoeuvres have largely been closed down. We have to face up to the challenge of identifying and developing new routes into effective political activity."

The endorsement of Gordon Brown for leader of the Labour Party in May could not have been more overwhelming, with 308 MPs nominating Brown, including rebels like Bob Marshall-Andrews. Left candidate, McDonnell, failed to achieve the support of even the soft left within the parliamentary party, nor the backing of any major union, and on the National Executive Committee (NEC), when a motion was moved to reduce the required number of nominations only two members voted for it.

Those of the neo-liberal right within Labour have irreversibly and structurally embedded their victory into the party's DNA. The rules and constitution have been changed to eliminate the levers that the left used to exercise influence; the conference is a meaningless rally; the social composition of the membership has shifted hugely towards managerial types; the pro-business, pro-war policies mean few activists under thirty would look at the party as anything remotely progressive. Ward meetings are sparse and poorly attended, and the party apparatus is an empty shell in most of the country. Milbank prevents left candidates being selected and the reduced powers of local authorities have removed the base from which the left has in the past built support from the bottom up. The union link now exists more in form than in content. Whereas union branches used to send delegates to General Committee meetings (the old General Management Committees) in each Constituency Labour Party (CLP), this practice has almost disappeared; lay activists and even full-timers are much less likely to be Labour Party members than they ever were before. The only concession won by the affiliated unions was the sop of the Warwick agreement before the election, none of which policies have been implemented. And now they have relinquished their right to pose policy motions to conference.

The aspect of hope in the situation is that the Labour Party may have irrevocably been won for the right, but the political views of its electoral base have not followed and are now to the left of it. And some trade unions find themselves in the position of directly being the ideological opponents of neo-liberalism without the intermediate role of the Labour Party, for example with the GMB's campaign over Private equity, or the RMT's campaign for public ownership of the railways. What is more, in the Labour Party's deputy leader ballot some 100,000 trade unionists voted for the centre left, Jon Cruddas. Compass, the organisation within the Labour Party associated with Jon Cruddas, produces a consistent left critique of New Labour, in both ideological and policy terms.

The major unions will not abandon the Labour Party, as there is no other viable option for them to pursue for influencing government. And as long as the Labour Party relies upon union funding, and the active support of TU officials during elections, the Party will retain the link, which in turn obscures the full extent to which Labour has become, in the words of Jon Cruddas and Jon Tricket: "a party that continues the neo-liberal revolution" (**New Statesman** 6 December 2007).

The constructive legacy of the McDonnell campaign is a nucleus of activists who are less isolated and more motivated than they were before, reflected in the relatively buoyant conference of the Labour Representation Committee in November. There is an increased recognition, as John McDonnell puts it, that "the left needs to open itself to co-operation with progressive campaigns within our community, learning from them, treating them with mutual respect, rejecting any patronising or sectarian approach and, where needed, to serve as the catalyst to instigate and facilitate campaigning activity. Creativity is also needed to stimulate the analysis, debate and discussion of the ideas and principles which we may share in our wish to transform our society" (**Morning Star** 28 September 2007).

Outside the Labour Party the most significant left organisations are the Green Party and Respect. The Greens include a significant left wing, and the Marxist Derek Wall has twice won elections to represent the party as national speaker. The Green



Left platform within the party is seeking to consolidate the gains that the left has made in terms of policy. There are very many impressive Green Party members at local and national level. However, the decentralised nature of the party has also allowed local Green councillors to go into coalition with Lib Dems and Tories; the electoralism of the Greens means they are not a party immediately attractive to campaigning activists; and the culture within the party is unappealing to trade unionists.

A much younger project than the Green Party, Respect - the Unity Coalition, hit the ground running and is the first English party to the left of Labour to win a seat in Westminster since 1945. Respect was also only 3,000 votes short of winning a second seat in parliament. It was the first time that the left had sunk deep roots among non-white disadvantaged inner city communities, with opposition to the Iraq war leading to many Muslims voting for Respect. In May 2006, Respect built on its success by winning 15 council seats in East London, and one in Birmingham. It has subsequently won council elections in Preston, Bolsover, and another seat in Birmingham

Yet for all this electoral success there were problems. Membership was shrinking not growing and a key layer of former Labour Party left-wingers who had been active in the Socialist Alliance (an earlier attempt at uniting England's highly divided far-left) either never joined Respect or left it within the first two years. The national conferences in both 2004 and 2005 were marked by numerous independent socialists resigning afterwards, due to an intolerant atmosphere where any disagreement was shouted down. The decision of Galloway to enter the reality TV show *Big Brother* damaged Respect's reputation, and exposed the weak relationship between Galloway and Respect national officers. Galloway's judgement on that occasion was questionable, but his subsequent media exposure, (his **Talksport** radio show gets 750,000 listeners) has allowed him to reach a truly mass audience for socialist politics.

Outside the strongholds of East London, Birmingham and Preston, Respect attracted very few activists who were not also SWP members. Many had written Respect off, including myself. but Respect's ability to hold a council seat in the Shadwell ward in Tower Hamlets in August, after a councillor had resigned, showed that the electoral base is sustainable. Respect has now split. With Galloway, the majority of the councillors and most independent activists on one side (Respect Renewal), and on the other side largely just the SWP, and very few others. Significantly, a number of new activists have now joined Respect Renewal. The precise details of the split have been thrashed out on the internet, but they follow a fairly critical, yet diplomatically worded, letter from George Galloway to the Respect National Council in August (see www.socialistunity.com/?p=726). The subsequent response by the SWP to that letter and resulting polarisation in Respect led to escalating tension and two rival conferences in November.

The immediate cause of the crisis was the realisation by Galloway that with the prospect of a snap general election, Respect had no candidates selected, no money in the bank and had lost half its members. These in themselves would have been sufficient reasons to doubt the competence of the National Secretary, but in addition John Rees had allegedly mishandled a potentially illegal foreign financial donation behind Galloway's back, a matter that has now been referred to the Electoral Commission for investigation. The political reasons for the inertia and

breakdown of relationships within Respect are more complex. The SWP's theory of Respect being a 'united front of a special type' led it to try to build two organisations in parallel, the SWP and Respect. But when relating to wider campaigns, and in the unions, they wear their SWP hat. On demonstrations they carry Socialist Worker placards, they sell their own newspaper and blocked launching a Respect paper. They seek to recruit to the SWP, not Respect.

SWP theoretician Alex Callinicos argues "in such broad coalitions it is essential for revolutionaries to retain independent organisation in order to combine building the coalition with the objective that gives this work its meaning - the construction of a mass revolutionary party" (**International Socialist Tendency**, Bulletin 2, 2002). And John Rees has expressed his view of the SWP's role very clearly: "In this project the socialists in Respect, who have the clearest understanding of the general situation in which we operate and the greatest organisational ability to create the alliances, have a crucial role to play. Where they are capable of engaging and leading the wider forces, Respect will succeed. If they fail, Respect will fail. There is too much at stake to allow this to happen, and too much to be won not to succeed" (**Socialist Worker** 14 May 2005).

So there was a two-tier membership as the SWP built its own organisation but sought to play the decisive political role in guiding Respect. As John Rees admitted, the SWP believed there was too much at stake for them to fail to be the leading force within Respect, so other members of Respect who saw it as their main political project had to rotate around the SWP's agenda. Non-SWP members of Respect believe that building Respect is worth doing in its own terms, and is not only worth doing as a step towards 'the construction of a mass revolutionary party. Fundamentally the SWP had a different agenda to other Respect members. The part of Respect aligned with George Galloway has the main base of membership in East London and Birmingham, and viable groups in Manchester, Cambridge, Bristol and elsewhere. They will also retain the voter loyalty. So Respect is in a contradictory position of having strong local electoral bases, and a high national profile, without having a national organisation. Galloway is also a controversial figure, who is simultaneously probably more able than anyone else of building a loyal electoral base and a mass audience, but is not always popular among labour movement activists.

So socialists in England are dispersed over a mosaic of organisations: the Labour Party, The Greens and Respect, as well as smaller groups, and of course non-aligned activists. Each of these projects has sufficient weight to retain the loyalty of their own supporters, but none is strong enough to pull everyone else towards it. The task must therefore be to seek some mutual support or at least non-aggression on the electoral front while simultaneously seeking collaborative practical work over campaigning issues, without organisational pre-conditions. In this way trust and confidence can be built, as well as exploring the scope for possible future convergence. Where local campaigning issues present themselves this is more straightforward, but elsewhere there needs to be some imagination about perhaps local publications or conferences, as well of course as work in the unions. ■

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workers - and eco-systems - unite!

Justin Kenrick argues that the agendas of socialists and greens are not only compatible, one cannot be achieved without the other.

How do we make the transition from capitalism to sufficiency, from a system of exploitation to ensuring the well-being of all people, species and ecosystems? What would such a transition look like? Would it, for a start, require a radical rethinking of what it is to be human, and therefore of what is socially and politically possible? The strategy outlined here is provoked by the scientific finding that climate change feedback loops are accelerating at previously unthinkable speeds; it is provoked by the much-repeated argument that we mustn't scare people with this science; and it is provoked by the belief that in extraordinary times, extraordinary things can happen. The suggestion being made here is that we have to 'tell it as it is', tell people about:

- The ecologically accelerating impacts of climate change, and also about
- A clear political strategy to stop this accelerating drive to extinction.
- The political strategy being suggested here involves:
- Supporting communities to undertake the Transitional Initiatives evident in, for example, community land buy-outs and in projects to reassert local and sustainable livelihoods in place of our current dependence on oil;
- Building alliances between these and similar Life Projects throughout the world, through which people are seeking sustainability and autonomy;
- Creating a Transitional electoral alliance to create a Transition Society: an alliance of those who are willing to face up to accelerating climate change, and willing to build alliances to protect and enable localities to refuse short-term exploitation in favour of long-term well-being.

In a nutshell, current 'affluence' is built on the exploitation of human and non-human others, and on a dependence on transient and fast-diminishing supplies of oil. In effect we each depend on the equivalent of 40 'oil slaves' (we depend on oil doing the work of 40 humans) to get, make, produce, sell, transport and dispose of the necessary and unnecessary stuff we use. A Transition Society would discard unnecessary production, and would make necessary production co-operative and sustainable. It would support initiatives which reject economic growth and its manufacturing of unsustainable affluence, unbearable impoverishment, and accelerating climate change. And to achieve this it may be important to show people why it is rational to be scared.

- that accelerating feedback loops are kicking in climate change decades earlier than previous scientific models had suggested (e.g. an ice free Arctic summer was predicted by 2070, then 2050, and now by 2012);
- that it may take the prospect of extinction to motivate people to get rid of a system which is killing people, species

and ecosystems now; and

- that this prospect may be paralysing people into supporting corporate-led climate change 'solutions' which deepen the social and ecological crisis.

Accelerating climate change feedback loops are evident: in the Arctic, which was predicted to be ice-free in summer by 2070, then by 2050 and now by 2012; in the Amazon and Southern Europe, where drying-out forests are vulnerable to devastating fires; and in the severe droughts of North America and Australia. Meanwhile we are persuaded that only economic growth can meet our needs. Growth of three per cent a year translates into a doubling every 23 years of the use of the fossil fuels which overpowers the ability of the soil, the forests, the oceans and the air to absorb CO². At the same time corporate competition driving this economic growth can only increase its profits by further exploiting social and environmental systems and disregarding the consequences. The responses to climate change by corporate compliant governments are the latest examples of this disregard. Here the focus is on carbon trading, which does not reduce the CO² going into the atmosphere, but turns it into an excuse for doing nothing. The focus is also on maintaining the so-called 'carbon sink' forests of the Global South so that economic growth can continue unchecked, while justifying Global players appropriation of local peoples' forests and livelihoods. But there is also rational reason to be hopeful:

- in managing these resources sustainably, many of these same local peoples demonstrate the viability of Commons systems of meeting human needs that are not based on scarcity, competition and amassing profit, but on ensuring that all have sufficient socio-ecological security to enable them to flourish as creative social beings.
- the rise of a powerful Global movement of movements is opposing corporations and governments suicidal 'business as usual' mentality;
- this movement draws inspiration from Commons systems of meeting local needs which refuse domination by extractive outside forces.

Such attempts to create, maintain or extend local resilience take inspiration from many indigenous peoples' Life Projects based on Commons systems in which people share decision-making over land use and political structures. These range from the Zapatistas autonomous zones in Mexico, to Cree regaining self-governance in Northern Quebec, from crofting communities regaining land rights in Scotland, to villagers holding out against the 'developers' bulldozers in Bengal:

"Life Projects are about living a purposeful and meaningful life. In this sense, their political horizons cannot be located in the future, just as living in the present cannot be put on hold in pursuit of a future goal. . . Life Projects have no political horizon; they are the

political horizon. They are not points of arrival, utopian places, narratives of salvation or returns to paradise. They are the very act of maintaining open-endedness as a politics of resilience.” (Blaser et al, **In the Way o Development**, Zed Books 2004)

In such Commons systems, local people control and determine resource use. The starting point is not a system of competition over resources made scarce by that very competition. Instead, it is a system based on commons sufficiency, in which resources are assumed to be abundant, and are made abundant by ensuring that all people and other species (all ecosystems) have sufficient to meet their needs and to ensure their flourishing. This ‘commons thinking’ is based on working to ensure sufficiency and abundance, on the notion that my well-being depends on your well-being, and on the assumption that solving problems involves working to restore relationships of trust rather than seeking to impose solutions on others. Moving towards a society based on Commons sufficiency, requires recovering a commons way of thinking and relinquishing the dualistic problem solving approach that underpins capitalism and non-egalitarian systems in general. Several questions follow from this:

- How do we make the transition from a system in which problems are made worse by the way solutions are imposed - imposed by a supposedly superior realm on a supposedly inferior realm - to a system that no longer divides the world into superior and inferior realms?
- How do we move towards a recognition that development workers, police, doctors, social workers and teachers are entirely dependent on others poverty, criminal acts, ill-health, social problems and supposed lack of education? For example, how do we recognise that ending poverty in Africa does not require the supposedly ‘superior’ wealthy and educated ‘West’ to intervene with charity, but requires the ‘West’ to stop building its wealth on forces of extraction and domination that impoverish Africa?
- How do we move from a system which depends on creating scarcity and insecurity, and depends on claiming superiority over others, to a society in which sufficiency and security are grounded in the ability to respond to fear and lack by continually rebuilding relationships of trust? How do we create a society in which the others problem is recognised as arising from a mutual world, and in which solutions are sought through dialogue and engagement?

A Commons approach recognises the rich resources available to us by starting from ensuring the well-being of locality, and the well-being of others in their localities, rather than by starting from deepening insecurity, scarcity and devastation through pursuing economic growth which is always at the expense of human and non-human others. “Communal use adapts land, water and work to local needs rather than transforming them for trade and accumulation” (Lohmann, www.thecornerhouse.org.uk/item.shtml?x=369050). In the sustenance economy “satisfying basic needs and ensuring long-term sustainability are the organising principles for natural resource use” (Shiva, *Earth Democracy*, Zed Books 2005). Life Projects are coming into focus not only through standing out as a force to be reckoned with in the Global South and North, but also through their ability to build alliances through which to wrest political space from corporation controlled governments. This is evident

in the way indigenous people have moved to take control of national governments in places like Bolivia, to secure degrees of autonomy through legal means in places like Canada, or through creative modes of resistance in places like Mexico.

Here in Scotland, crofting communities’ successful campaigns to take back collective control of their communities led to the Scottish Land Reform Act which secured that right for a whole range of rural communities. Now, in response to the threat of peak oil and climate change, and as a result of seeing national and international governments doing worse than nothing to reduce our use of carbon emitting fossil fuels, there is an emerging movement of Transition Initiatives in villages, towns and cities in Ireland, England and Scotland. Here local people are seeking to enable their communities to make the transition from an oil based economy, to a local economy where local decision-making can ensure sufficiency for all.

In order to stop the processes that are driving climate change, and driving human and ecological impoverishment in the present, there is clearly a need to both continue building global alliances and to continue building initiatives that reclaim localities from the ground up. However, both of these approaches miss the middle level of action that we need to urgently engage in if we are to make the space for communities to take back control of their lives, and for such global alliances to mature into an interlinking network of initiatives, which can ensure sufficiency and abundance for all. This middle level is that of nation state governments. A state is a body which is seen as having a ‘legitimate’ monopoly on violence (in other words, other similarly coercive bodies recognise it as having a similar right to themselves), and the supposed legitimacy of such bodies is crucial to enforcing the unequal system of property ownership on which their power depends, and which provide the framework for the continuing appropriation and devastation of our social and ecological fabric. Such a property system is challenged by communities taking back control of their lives. For example, it is challenged by the possibility of urban land reform, of extending to urban communities the right to own and manage resources that are brought back into local common ownership.

So, how could we manage to make the transition from state supporting systems of capitalist appropriation to local control and locality supporting systems of commons sufficiency? How can we make a transition to life projects which can enable us to leave the remaining oil and gas in the ground? How can we refuse to be taken in any longer by the processes so central to capitalism (advertising, commodities, etc) that manufacture wants, and by processes so central to state control (education, media, etc) that manufacture fears? Can we reclaim socio-ecological security through reclaiming the state framework so that it no longer stands in the way of expanding local networks built on dialogue and creativity, and on strategies which meet our needs and ensure our collective well-being?

This requires a Transitional Alliance beyond Life Project, Socialist and Green Movements. Although such a political strategy needs to be based on bringing together the best in the Global Life Project movements (as described above) and in the Socialist and Green movements (as described below), a political strategy like the one outlined below can be embraced not only by those for whom the nightmare alternative makes it a realistic vision, but also by those who see it as completely unrealistic! The old slogan - “Be realistic, demand the



impossible” - suggests that to achieve even a moderate change in a seemingly implacable system, we need to not only demand an engagement in reasonable dialogue, but we also need to make powerful political demands that force an implacable system to compromise out of fear that the radical alternatives being forcefully proposed, might seize people’s imaginations and seem more realistic than the nightmare created by the implacable system. In our current context: state and corporate fear of the radical social change which their inactivity in the face of climate change might bring about, could make them act to curb CO² emissions in practice rather than just in rhetoric; just as, during the Cold War, Western states and corporations had to accept the creation of social democratic, and even welfare states, out of fear that people would insist on an even more radical alternative.

So, how might a political strategy combine the best in the Socialist and the Green traditions with the Life Projects described above?

Socialists see the human suffering caused by capitalism (the pursuit of profit as an end in itself). They are very clear about the ultimate cause of the ecological crisis. However, their understandable focus on the impoverishment of the many can mean they mistakenly see the solution in terms of the state taking control of the same process of economic growth to enable increased production and a redistribution of material wealth, rather than recognising that it is not the scarcity of commodities that is the problem, it is the structures of inequality central to the process of producing and consuming commodities which drives human and ecological impoverishment.

Greens see the environmental devastation caused by industrial growth, itself the corporate expression of the profit motive through the destruction of nature. They see the environmental devastation caused by material accumulation, itself the individual

jit of profit, where ver-elusive security s sought through the acquisition of more wages, more possessions, and more status. However, their understandable focus on the ecological crisis can lead them to mistake the problem as being people’s lifestyles, industrialisation and alienation from nature, rather than see all of these as outcomes of systems of domination, and in particular of capitalism’s inherent process of breaking up and remixing inter-relationships

(ecological processes and human activity) into commodities to be bought and sold for profit, which is not an end but the beginning of another cycle of profit maximisation.

The need is to bring together a Green focus on the exploitation and destruction of human and other ecologies (the destruction of otherwise infinitely self-renewing interconnected ecological localities) with a Socialist focus on the capitalist process of exploitation and accumulation that is driving that destruction (driving it through the redirection of human creativity into further exploiting and destroying the relations that constitute our socio-ecological reality). This requires the development of an understanding that challenges dominant ideas of who we are, builds resilient interlinking localities, and calls the bluff on state power. So here are three suggestions:

- Rethink who we are as humans: including freeing our aspirations, imaginations and strategies from the confines of capitalism and the domination thinking that gave rise to capitalism and is perpetuated by it.
- Reconfigure what is socially possible: including through modelling Transition communities based on the practices of commons sufficiency.
- Reclaim the political space: including through building alliances that reject the insatiable economic growth of capitalism and that hold the political space open for the transition to sufficiency.

Rethinking who we are as humans would require two steps. Firstly Rethinking political and social systems based on the creativity of humans. Distinguishing who we really are as human sentient beings from the impoverished form we are forced to take under non-egalitarian systems, and especially under capitalism. Rejecting the mode of human interaction that assumes that my

well-being depends on the exploitation of others, and instead, reasserting that my well-being depends on your well-being. Secondly Establishing a relational understanding. In place of the win/lose ideology of competition in the market/education/ etc, we need a recognition that causing others to lose, destroys the basis of mutuality and ultimately of survival. What needs to be asserted is a value more persuasive than the profit motive. This value is not simply human and ecological survival rather than extinction; but is also the fact that real value is found in the practical realisation of relations of justice and equality based on ensuring sufficiency, not in seemingly insatiable accumulation.

Reconfiguring what is socially possible would mean we need to build resilient interlinking localities. We need to rapidly grow networks of communities pushing for autonomy and sustainability whether based in the land reform movement, zero carbon initiatives, or in Transition towns, villages and cities focusing on localisation, community sufficiency and the move from environmental degradation, through zero impact, to positive integration with ecological systems. It would also mean we need to develop localised sufficiency systems. The current Transition initiatives are one example of a way of motivating people in towns, cities and villages to combine their energies to meet the reality of Climate Change and Peak Oil by collectively developing local economies and livelihoods. These involve people collaborating to develop energy systems, recycling systems, food production systems, local currencies, education, care for the elderly, etc., that ensure localisation and ensure interaction between localities based on exchanging to meet needs rather than to increase profit.

Reclaiming the political space (or Calling the Bluff on Power) will require an alliance that rejects the insatiable economic growth driving climate change, and that holds the political space open for this transition to sufficiency.

This could involve: calling on the major political parties to reject economic growth in favour of ensuring sufficiency, and (assuming they refuse); calling for the formation of a Transitional Alliance (made up of Socialists, Greens and like-minded independents from any or no political party) to contest the next Scottish election on the platform of uprooting the cause of climate change and impoverishment, through rejecting systems based on profit for the few and the exploitation of the many, and enabling society to be re-oriented to ensuring sufficiency and a future for all. Either way, Transitional Society policies would have to be implemented:

- Nationalise to localise: nationalise only in order to localise production in community owned processes. This would also involve: creating socially useful and meaningful work; ending jobs that involve the appropriation of ones labour by others; ensuring a basic wage for all and the establishment of co-operative based work places.
- Ending economic growth: replacing the profit motive with the sufficiency motive. This would involve bringing down the pack of cards that is the financial system, and ending the anti-human and anti-ecological developments it finances. The fear here is twofold: firstly of the financial flight of the so-called 'wealth creators', and secondly of disorder giving the pre-existing state powers an excuse to use force to re-establish itself.
- Financial flight and the removal of the money motive: this is the first aspect of the immediate critical moment. It would

require weathering a crisis of confidence (since everyone's faith has been placed in capitalism, everyone's well-being is mediated by money). All the financial institutions and investment projects which are driven simply by profit would fall away. This is where people would have to hold their nerve and continue to work if they judge that their work contributes to social well-being (e.g. producing food, driving trains, caring for the elderly, etc.). It's a critical moment, requiring clear preparation to enable processes to be in place that ensure accountability to each other. In addition, there would need to be clear tasks that those who are relinquishing unemployment or what would have become 'useless work' (e.g. financial services, advertising, etc) can rapidly redeploy to (e.g. in Scotland we would need over a million new farmers).

- The Barrage of threats from financial, media and state powers: this is likely to be the second aspect of the immediate critical moment. There need to be clear collective forms to resist the inevitable attempts by capital and the centralising state to overthrow a democratically mandated transition. Here, the potential of new media, of mass mobilisation, of already existing forms of organisation based around resisting exploitation, around social change, and around enabling localities transition to sufficiency, would be the key to resisting the forces that will still be insisting that there can be no other route than capitalism or equivalent forms of appropriation through coercive control.
- Making zero carbon sufficiency an immediate objective. Firstly, by recognising that current responses to climate change are being co-opted by capitalism to further their profits through providing the excuse to further appropriate local peoples resources such as the forests of the Global South, and to develop carbon trading schemes which move the deckchairs on the Titanic, while enabling full steam ahead with business/extinction as usual. Secondly, by stopping all major activities which cause climate change (air flights, oil and gas extraction, unnecessary car use, etc) and further supporting localities to develop the transition to the local solutions and Commons systems which a zero carbon sufficiency requires and enables.

Has the irresistible force of economic growth come up against the immovable object of ecological limits? Or does this metaphor also come up against its own limits, since capitalism is just one human social system amongst an abundance of options, and ecology need not be a limiting object but our abundant and infinitely complex home?

The persistence and re-emergence of Commons systems and Life Projects, in which priority is given to ensuring the well-being of all, demonstrates that another world than coercive capitalism is not only possible, but has always persisted, wherever people find the resources to resist coercion. The ecological crisis is not only the consequence of coercive and beguiling capitalism, but also creates the conditions that make its demise a certainty: whether through driving us to extinction or through motivating us to re-discover what is humanly, socially and politically possible. ■

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reaching out from inside

Concluding that the ‘hollowing out’ of the Labour Party has weakened it as a vehicle for change, Vince Mills argues that it can at least be a vehicle for some sort of unity

It is dangerous to predict how a particular year will be remembered, especially in relation to political significance, but I would like to take a chance and try to say how 2007 will be seen in the future or at any rate in relation to Scottish left politics. I do not believe that it will be remembered for Wendy’s £950 club, nor the electoral victory of the pro-business SNP, posing as a social democratic party (though more of both New Labour and the SNP later). I believe that what instead will fascinate historians, well left historians at least, is the generalised crisis of the left that has developed in Scotland and for that matter in the UK. But I want to concentrate on Scotland.

The facts are fairly well known so I will rehearse them only briefly. At the Scottish elections the parties to the left of Labour were, in the case of Greens, reduced to a rump and in the case of SSP and Solidarity, wiped-out. At the time of the election the acrimonious split of Solidarity from the SSP was seen as major contributory factor. However, without wishing to dismiss its significance, the collapse of the Green vote suggests another more potent reason for the SSP’s demise; that was a desire among a significant section of the electorate to ensure that the SNP was victorious over New Labour. The ‘vote anybody but New Labour’ approach was already evident in polls and by-election results and so was the seeping away of support from the SSP even before the split. This is important in understanding future prospects for the left as an electoral force at any rate, since it suggests that the SNP support comprised both its traditional ‘Scotland first’ core and those who voted SNP as the most credible progressive opposition to New Labour. This section of SNP support in 2007 is surely open to being convinced that a serious challenge from another quarter is worthy of support.

What happened to the Left inside the Labour Party? Unlike the 2003 election where the left suffered a high profile defeat in losing John McAllion, this time the small group of Left MSPs survived intact. With McConnell’s departure, there was real hope that this small group could have provided the core of votes necessary to mount a challenge to Wendy Alexander. In the end, it was two votes short. This, of course, took place not long after Brown had seen to it that there was no challenge for the leadership of New Labour at a British level. What this showed was not just the weakness of the respective parliamentary lefts but perhaps, more significantly, the lack of desire of the large union affiliates to risk the ‘political stability’ a contest might bring (as they saw it) for fear that it might strengthen the hand of the Tories. Without this leverage, the left in the constituencies in both Scotland and elsewhere in the UK was too weak to force its MPs and MSPs to support a challenge.

All this is somewhat ironic given that both Brown and Alexander, rather than leading a grateful Party to a new golden age of New Labour hegemony (albeit from the opposition benches in Scotland), have presided instead over accusations of sleaze and incompetence and to poll ratings that Salmond and Cameron

could never have achieved under the force of their own politics. There are probably Labour MPs and MSPs, and perhaps a few union leaders, who, under pressure from the New Labour leadership, rolled over, now wonder at the wisdom of coronations as opposed to democratic scrutiny.

It is too late. The ideologically exhausted New Labour project staggers on with a discredited leadership that cannot, or more accurately will not, distance itself from the marriage to corporate capital, flexible workforces, and privatisation that New Labour has come to symbolise. And in that union lies its demise. For as it distances itself from its historic social base of working people, some actually not in work, some blue collar, some white collar and yes, some even in well-paid positions indeed, but still committed to equality and social justice; as it leaves them behind for the mythical middle Scotland, it robs itself of its capacity to challenge the SNP from the left and leaves itself open to the sudden shifts in loyalty that concerns about the level of inheritance tax, for example, bring.

In Scotland, New Labour is now trying to make something of Salmond’s relationship with Trump. Of course, had Scottish New Labour revised its ideological foundations after the election defeat, perhaps it might have emerged arguing that the SNP is a pro-business party, which it is, and that they, Labour, would defend the right of local authorities in Scotland to act in the best interests of their electors, certainly when they were defending local interests against bullying US billionaires. Not a bit of it. New Labour MSPs may have begun political life sceptical about the fundamentals of neo-liberalism but now they are welded to it. For example, Lewis MacDonald, the MSP for Aberdeen Central, reacted to the Trump affair by lambasting the local council committee and quickly supporting the SNP’s bid to get round local opposition. From his website, we have the following:

He [Lewis MacDonald] asked Alex Salmond if he agreed that the Council should urgently review its own rules, after seven of its 68 elected members were able to throw out the Trump golf proposals without the vast majority of their fellow-councillors getting to vote. ... The First Minister agreed that many, many councillors in Aberdeenshire were denied the opportunity to vote on the Trump proposals. ... Lewis Macdonald said after First Minister’s Question Time: ‘That is sufficient reason for Ministers to have called in the application, since the Council was powerless to overturn a decision made in its name.’

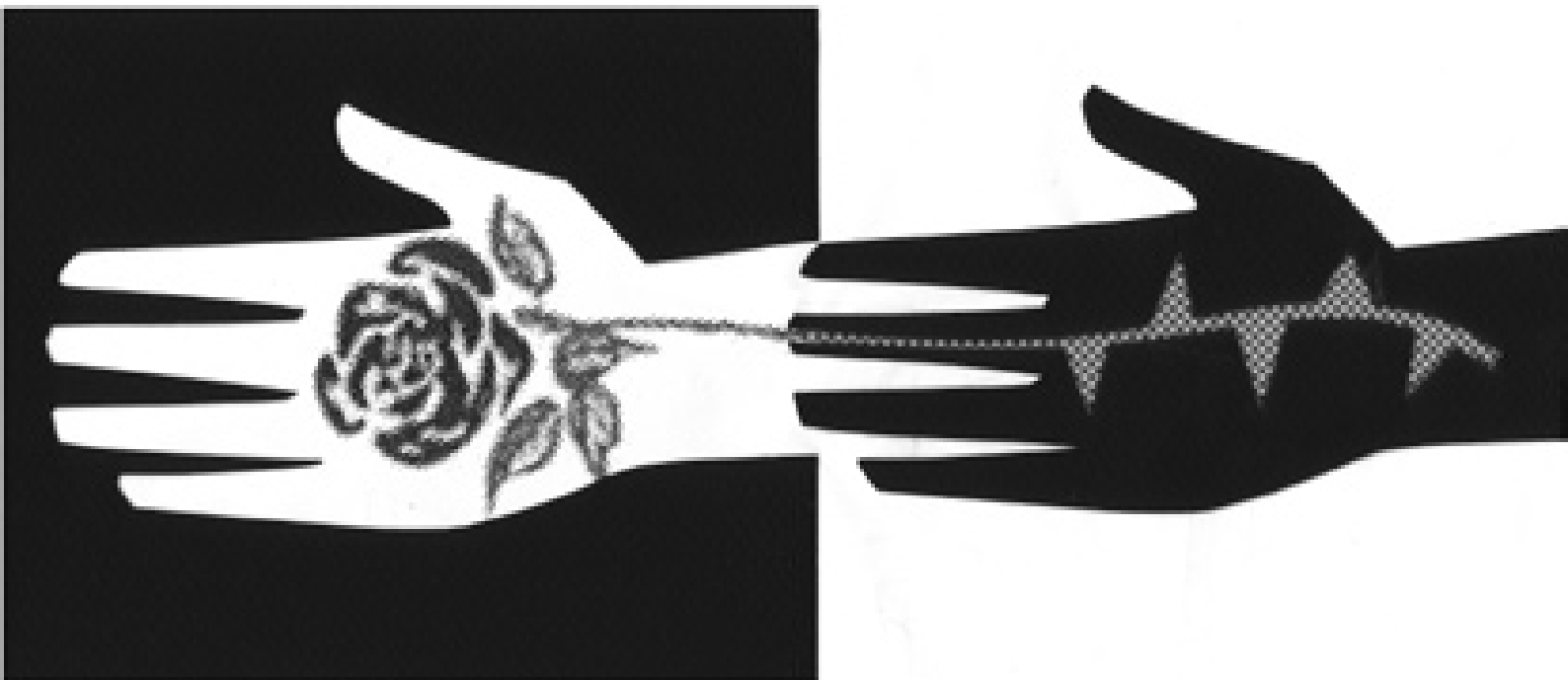
He had earlier been caught on television in a Committee discussion opining that the Trump affair showed how you had to accept that capital was now mobile globally. And similarly with the graduate endowment tax, Scottish New Labour could have welcomed the move but argued that it was too limited an attack on student debt which the UCU union (previously AUT) argues

is dissuading young Scots from entering higher education. Instead, in religious abeyance to Brown's mystical belief in targeting, they opposed the SNP move. In short, Scottish New Labour, even in opposition, remains committed to a right-wing ideology. There is no prospect of a majority challenge to this from within the parliamentary group, nor for that matter from the weakened left in the constituencies - weakened because of the many who left unable to stomach the pro-war, pro-business stance of their party leadership. It is, of course, possible that the unions might still provide the basis of opposition, but that does not look likely. The Unite-T&G Scottish leadership provided Wendy with her campaign headquarters - perhaps they regret that now.

More to the point, like the Labour Party itself, there is no left political leadership at rank-and-file level in the Scottish affiliated unions, although Unison Labour Link in Scotland, which supported the McDonnell challenge, might well provide

time, but eventually there will come a time when there will be an opportunity to consider how we put socialism back on the agenda of this nation. I am reminded of a cartoon of four people in a boat, two at the front and two at the back where there is clearly a leak with the waves beginning to come over the rear. One of those at the front remarks 'thank God the leak's not at our end.'

Theism aside, that may well reflect rather well, our current situation. The left in the unions and inside and outside the Labour Party needs to begin a joint dialogue about a shared future or more to the point, how we ensure that we have one. Hopefully, this will not just be a theoretical discussion, but a joint programme of action where we believe there is a shared perspective for that action. The Labour Representation Committee (LRC) was founded originally in 1900 to fight for political representation for the working class and re-founded in July 2004, to fight for socialist policies in the Labour Party. It has the history and the flexibility to



a welcome exception. Most members are not politically active and are therefore not pressing their leadership for changes to their union's relationship with the Labour Party leadership. This situation merits much more analysis than it will get here. But we are a long way from the days when the left, largely communist leadership of the unions could mobilise at every level of the movement.

So how do we assess this? Is this the basis of quiet despair? No, but it does mean there has to be a fundamental recognition of some uncomfortable truths. It is possible that the New Labour project will implode, that the Labour Party will go into crisis and that the left will emerge as vibrant force able to take control. However, those of us in the Labour Party have to acknowledge not only that the party has been hollowed out but also that many of the Party's democratic mechanisms have been closed down. The decision in Bournemouth to rid the party of the last vestige of direct democratic political intervention - contemporary motions - has to be seen as a defining moment, although there seems to be no attempt to try to make a similar change to the Scottish Labour Party rule book. I accept that for many in the left outside the Labour Party, the legal aftermath of their split will mean that they may be pre-occupied for some

bring together those forces willing to fight for socialist policies in and beyond the Labour Party.

It is difficult to believe that the current crisis in New Labour will not drive more members out of the party and perhaps even out of politics. The crisis of the left outside the Labour Party may also have similar consequences. This, coupled with a renewed attack on union funding for Labour that the Tories, no doubt with enthusiastic collusion from many in New Labour's ranks, are calling for will further weaken the basis of the left's traditional strategy for changing Labour.

In these circumstances, the left is obliged to respond and in Scotland both the Morning Star Campaign Committee and Labour Party Campaign for Socialism (CfS) have agreed to facilitate the setting up of a Scottish LRC. We hope that the LRC can reach out to everyone in Scotland who eschews sectarian solutions and is serious about building a future based on the ideals of socialism. It would be naive to assume that this will be an easy project. But it would be moral cowardice not to attempt it. ■

Vince Mills is an executive member of Labour Campaign for Socialism and serves on the National Committee of the LRC. He edited the Red Paper on Scotland (2005) and contributes regularly to the Morning Star, Tribune and Labour Briefing.

left a bit

Christina McKelvie argues that while she comes from a trades union background and Enterprise Minister Jim Mather is often seen as neo-liberal, it s possible for both to work together to achieve greater social justice

There's an argument in Scottish politics that left and right are outmoded terms in the modern arena, that government occupies a very small space these days in what used to be the old centre ground. You could develop that argument further and argue that left and right have completed the circle and have arrived together at pragmatism. It's even possible to argue that New Labour's adoption of attitudes and policies so distant from the roots of the Labour movement has stripped all meaning from the definitions of left and right. Those arguments, though, are dimmed by a brief examination of what has happened recently under devolution. Stormont has Ian Paisley working with Martin McGuinness in an extremely constructive manner, and apparently delivering for the people of Northern Ireland - difficult to discern a left or right bias in either of them, but their alliance with the left-wing Government of Wales where Labour and Plaid Cymru are in coalition and the social democratic

minority Government of the SNP in Scotland challenges the right wing ideology of Gordon Brown. There is a definite lean to the left in devolved government.

The SNP is an interesting case. Many people see us as having social democratic policies in social policy areas but neo-liberal or even Tory-leaning policies in the areas of the economy and business - and people ask how someone like myself can be in the same party as Jim Mather. Take a closer look, though. It would be easy to separate the policies into two columns - ending prescription charges, abolishing tuition fees and the moves to abolish PFI/PPP in building Scotland's public services could be described as left wing while cutting business rates, scrapping bridge tolls, the support for first time buyers and the intent to lower corporation tax when we can might be put down to a latent right wing tendency coming through. It doesn't wash out as simply as that though.

Jim Mather will quite happily tell you that the abolition of the Graduate Endowment tuition fee and the continuing moves towards restoring grants actually fit quite well into his business development plans. He'll tell you that the country needs a well-educated workforce to drive the economy forward and will need it even more in the years to come. He'll also tell you that student loans repayments are carving too much disposable income out of the economy and that's acting as a drag on the whole country as well as being a ridiculously expensive system to operate. Like myself he was baffled by the Conservative group in the Scottish Parliament seeking to keep the Graduate Endowment tuition fee. Neither of us could believe that they couldn't see it as a tax on learning - the very kind of tax that Tories have traditionally opposed.

Jim will tell you that PFI/PPP is a waste of valuable public resources (as the Auditor General pointed out a few years ago) and that other funding systems would be far better for spreading the benefits around more. The Scottish Government's actions are constrained at the moment by the rules imposed by the Treasury. The Scotland Office and the Treasury have warned that they are likely to oppose the Scottish Futures Trust proposed by the SNP Government as a vehicle for moving away from PFI/PPP. Prescription charges can follow the same route - removing a log-jam from the system and delivering a more streamlined NHS, delivering more quickly and maintaining a healthier workforce as well as delivering social justice. You can go right through SNP policies and pin business and economic reasons onto them - a country that's running well is a country that will be more prosperous and a country that is more prosperous can be run even better. Building a better health service, a better education system, a more equitable justice system is what builds a better business environment and a better economy. In an independent country, of course, that would mean bringing in more money for the government to spend on making the country a better place to be.

How does it look from the other side? How does cutting business



rates, freezing council tax, reducing red tape, scrapping bridge tolls and so on equate to my belief in a fairer country? Why should I be supporting initiatives that look designed to enhance the wealth of businesswomen and businessmen? To begin with, I've got absolutely nothing against wealth that is earned (providing the appropriate taxes are paid, of course). If my neighbour goes and builds herself a company which brings in a fortune for her that's fine - I won't be demanding that she gives it all away, and I don't believe that she should have to do the work of government, either. It's the work of government to ensure that we all have equal access to life's opportunities and to ensure that no-one is left destitute. While governments cannot create the social glue that holds our communities together, they can and must create the conditions in which that social capital can grow - a good government will be looking to open up opportunities for its people - including the opportunity to build and enhance their businesses and their wealth, so I have no concerns about the Scottish Government helping people to become more wealthy - so long as we all get the same chances. I'm delighted to be able to point out that Fidel Castro agrees with me - the thriving business environment is what keeps Cuba going. I think we can safely place Castro on the left wing of the spectrum.

There are also the benefits to everyone else of businesses growing. The Federation of Small Businesses likes to point out that the number of unemployed people in Scotland is almost the same as the number of small and medium sized businesses, so if these businesses could grow enough to take on the average of one extra person each we would be close to full employment. That's as maybe, and I think we should be looking to getting to full employment sooner rather than later and to make sure that the quality of the jobs being created is relatively high. But how do you guarantee that the businesses will take on more staff? You can't guarantee that, just as you can't compel the populace to feel safe, but you can create the conditions for each of these things to happen. Removing the business rates burden completely from the smallest businesses and progressively for businesses as you go up the scale gives the smallest businesses, the sole traders, the small shops, the people starting out, a better chance to survive first and then thrive - making it more likely that they will take on staff as they expand. Scotland loses about a third of start-up businesses in the first few years of their operation, and a business which has gone bust is not employing anyone. It's the same with reducing bureaucracy wherever we can - it simply gives businesses a chance, and that means that there are likely to be more employment opportunities, more people employed, and wages being driven upwards.

Similarly, in offering support to first-time buyers the SNP wants to allow people to establish themselves in life, put down roots, and start contributing to society. Running alongside the programme of building for the social rented sector, giving help to first-time buyers offers Scots the choice of renting or buying, opening up life-chances, offering Scots a range of options, making Scotland a better place to live, making the country

better. Left wing or right wing - or perhaps just the right thing to do?

I am fairly confident that most politicians active in Scotland want to raise the living standards in our country. Where we disagree is how we should go about making Scotland a better place and what exactly that better place should look like. There is the difference of opinion about whether the economy exists to serve

the people or whether people should serve the economy and the split over whether the criminal justice system should be punitive, prophylactic or rehabilitative (or all three), and, likewise, there are different opinions on how our public services should be delivered. What is clear, though, is that politicians in Scotland, by and large, want to improve the country, and the differences of opinion are points of debate rather than reasons to dislike.

It is my party that I believe has the best answers, of course, and it is the SNP which most closely reflects my own attitudes and opinions. The innate belief in social justice that runs through the SNP has an echo

in the Scottish psyche; the sense that we are all in this life together and collective action for common gains delivers more benefits than individual striving without the support network of a properly functioning society. We are a party that holds fast to a belief that Scotland can be better and that she can be made better through the collective effort of her people. That leaves us with an apparent lean to the left in social policy and to the right in economic policy. Whether either of them stands up to proper scrutiny is another matter. What can be said, though, is that we have a collectivist mentality in the SNP, and it's a trait that not only allows Jim Mather and myself to be in the same party, but makes it more than sensible that we should be.

Jim and I come at life from different angles, we have different ideas about politics, and we see different routes for Scotland to take, but we both have the same ambition for Scotland, the same belief in this excellent, medium sized country, and the same trust in the Scottish people to make the right decisions. I find myself agreeing with Jim across the spectrum of policy, coming from different angles but landing in the same spot, having taken a different route to get where we are, we find ourselves sharing a common ground. In some ways it doesn't matter how you get to where you want to go but there is an extra underpinning to the strength of your belief in the rightness of your case when someone else has followed a different path and come to the same understanding of what needs to be done.

We've begun the journey into SNP Government and the implementation of SNP policy from a minority position, and it won't be long now until we can see whether the SNP has got it right in having the panorama instead of just left or right. 2007 was a year of incredible change in Scottish politics and a year of massive advance for the SNP. 2008 might be even more interesting. ■

Christina McKelvie is a Scottish National Party MSP and a member of the SNP Trade Union Group

ending old attitudes

Lou Howson looks back on ten years of policy-making which has failed to involve the elderly

A document with the above title was published by the Scottish Executive in March 2007. It is loaded with the usual patronising rubbish which has become the hallmark of New Labour since 1997 when, in a document entitled 'The Tories have betrayed pensioners' we were promised that Labour would put pensioners' voices at the heart of government. They would ensure wider consultation with pensioners about issues which affect their lives and encourage the development of pensioners' councils and forums so that pensioners' voices can be at the heart of decision making in local authorities as well as central government. This brand of pernicious perfidy has consistently characterised most policy announcements concerning older people for the past decade. On the only occasion when older people's voices were listened to was when Henry McLeish consulted with representatives of all Scotland's older people prior to introducing free personal care, for which he was promptly politically assassinated by order of Downing Street.

The usual excuses refer to the 'economic burden' of an ageing population. This canard was brought to the fore in the disastrous Reagan-Thatcher period when the greedy 'entrepreneurs' put forward such rubbish as 'the costs of global ageing will be far beyond the means of even the world's wealthiest nations unless retirement benefit systems are radically reformed. Failure to do so, to prepare early and boldly enough, will spark economic crises that will dwarf the recent meltdowns in Asia and Russia'. The purveyors of such rubbish blather on about 'dependency ratios' whilst conveniently forgetting to mention that National wealth in Britain has consistently increased at an average of 2.5 per cent per annum for the past 50 years and shows no signs of alteration. Yes, the proportion of older people is increasing as the proportion of young people declines. These statistics have persisted since the beginning of the last century. Prior to then very few working people lived to 70 and beyond and too many of our grandmothers died prematurely after producing families of between ten and twenty children. That such events are now history should be cause for National rejoicing. Our comparatively wealthy society is well able to afford good childcare and education whilst providing for everyone in their later years. If our political masters were sincere in their many statements over the past decade then by now we would be among the foremost in the world in caring for our old (and young) instead of being nearer to the bottom of the league.

In 2005 the Scottish Executive in partnership with COSLA and NHS Scotland published a document entitled - 'Better Outcomes for Older People'. The Document clearly stated: "The framework for joint services for older people should ensure the effective engagement and participation of older people in planning and developing joint services. People's experience of consultation processes and events are frequently tokenistic. The challenge is to ensure their active participation and involvement in the development of services." Around the same time the Scottish Executive was proclaiming that Consultation on its own is not enough, people should be involved right through if real change is to take place, otherwise we merely create an illusion of consultation. Words can confuse and disguise meanings. A common assumption about consultation is that is about gathering information to improve existing practice and to provide something better and more responsive to people's

needs. Reporting and feedback must be part of the process so that people can respond to actions carried out for their benefit and can understand why. Conversely, service providers will benefit from hearing directly from those whom they aspire to serve. Real consultation can only take place between older people and those who have the political power to make real improvements to their lives. Those agencies that exist to serve the needs of older people should have a voice in the consultation process but should not be in the role of final arbitrator. Any body set up by the Executive to consult with older people should be elected by older people on a geographic basis. Consultation at local level should be carried out on a similar basis.

Prior to the setting up the Scottish Parliament, pensioners in Scotland thought that we would have real input in to matters concerning our welfare. In April 1998 34 delegates from 12 pensioners organisations throughout Scotland met with Henry McLeish MP in Stirling. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss "Looking Forward to the Scottish Parliament" with Henry McLeish MP, Minister for Devolution. Various views were expressed concerning pensions, welfare etc. Many older people felt bitterly resentful concerning their treatment over the previous two decades but the majority looked forward with anticipation to the setting up of the new Parliament. A further meeting was held in December 1998 to discuss with Mr McLeish how best the Parliament could serve the needs of older people. Mr McLeish suggested that a joint policy paper be produced outlining the views of Scottish older people. A comprehensive paper was produced which concluded by stating that a joint consultative group be set up consisting of older people elected on a geographical basis. This committee would be consulted at the earliest stages of policy development, not when legislation is finalised. Furthermore a Minister should be appointed with responsibility for the Elderly; the Minister should make regular reports to Parliament. Such a structure should be adequately funded and resourced. The Parliament should recognise that older people are best able to speak for the needs of older people. Whilst organisations made up primarily of paid staff have a role to play only older people representing older people's organisations should be consulted when formulating legislation.

Sadly after the Parliament was set up, pensioners were frozen out; some groups which appeared to be politically acceptable were consulted sporadically, as were organisations of 'professionals'. A Junior Minister was given responsibility for the Elderly. Some of those given this responsibility were friendly but everyone was conscious the 'Big Brother was watching'. The Cabinet Office in London came up with various proposals which never were accepted by pensioners due to the preponderance of 'professional' involvement motivated by Ministerial instructions from on high. Now that we have a new Government in Scotland perhaps we will be consulted by Ministers who, if they are democrats will reject the silly proposals contained in "All our Futures" and set up a genuine Consultative Body consisting of older people from all of Scotland. A good start might be to study the papers from 1998 when we last had a Minister who sincerely set out to meet with older people to listen to their problems and who did something about them. Alas Poor Henry! ■

Lou Howson is Chair of Dumfries and Galloway Elderly Forum

no end to privatisation

Gerry McCartney critiques the Scottish Government's plans to replace PFI and is unconvinced it represents real change

Just before the Scottish parliament emptied for the Christmas holidays, the SNP government published its long-awaited consultation paper on proposals to create a 'Scottish Futures Trust'. This is important because this represents the SNP alternative to the private financing of public sector infrastructure such as school and hospitals, first termed PFI (private finance initiative) under the Tories and then rebranded as PPP (public private partnerships) under New Labour.

Before winning the election, the SNP had campaigned heavily on the issue of privatisation, claiming that PFI would be ended and common sense public financing restored. The basis of this would be the issue of bonds and the holding of new buildings and infrastructure in 'trust'. This effectively meant that the SNP intended to approach the money markets looking to raise money today by promises to pay back the money at low but guaranteed levels of interest. This is a tried and tested method of public sector financing that, given the framework of a capitalist system, Socialists normally welcome. It means that no profits are taken out of the system other than the low rate of interest for the money loan. What was more questionable is the proposal to hold the newly built assets (e.g. a school) in 'trust'.

The Government consultation on the creation of the Scottish Futures Trust (SFT) has now been published. It is something of a disappointment. Currently planned PFIs will go ahead. Existing PFIs will continue. The issuing of bonds is revealed to be only a future aspiration. The consultation document welcomes the involvement of the private sector in the provision of public services and the 'additionality' of their involvement. This term, additionality, is a euphemism for privatisation. Under PFI and PPP, private companies were attracted by guaranteed high profits for around 30 years. The difference between SFT and PFI or PPP is the creation of a 'trust' to own the assets, or to manage the owner of the assets (e.g. a private consortium). This trust will be a not-for-profit private company. The published information about this is sketchy, but is it presumed that its shares will be owned by the Scottish Government, and that it will raise money from the private sector for investment. Another possibility is that the trust will contract with private consortia to own and run the asset (much like already happens with PFI). The trust will not be able to be under government control (or publicly accountable) if it is to raise money from the private sector without the Treasury blocking it. The board will therefore be appointed from the great and the good (or possibly just the friends and funders) of the Government.

The Government claims that the trust may make a surplus (profit), and that it will distribute this to the community because it will not be profit making. This prospect is however unlikely, given that most contracts with the private sector do not result in the private company saying 'we didn't spend all the money, so here is your change'. However, any surplus that is created will only be money gained by overcharging the Government, local authority or health board that is paying for the asset. It therefore represents a diversion of public money from the democratic structures to an unelected trust for distribution.

Those who have campaigned against housing stock transfer or the creation of trusts to own and run leisure services will be

familiar with the problems of this model. Trusts are not accountable to the public as their boards are not elected. The use of trusts is an expensive method of financing public sector investment because they sit outside the public sector and therefore do not attract the preferentially low interest rates that governments can benefit from. The idea that the risks of investment (i.e. the potential for costs to rise) will be carried by the private sector has repeatedly been shown to be a myth and private investors will be guaranteed payouts for decades. The contracts are inflexible and mean that any changes that are required in the future are ultra-expensive to rectify. The private sector is adept at cutting corners

and drawing up contracts that reduce the quality of the product. These problems will be even more acute if the SFT is only managing the private consortium rather than raising the finance itself.

In short, privatisation in the SNP's Scotland will continue both with New Labour's PPP and as the SNP's new idea (sic), the Scottish Futures Trust. We can expect the Treasury in London to pick a fight with the SNP about the financing of the SFT, but they are unlikely to be able to prevent it as it will sit outside the public sector. The EU might cause more of a problem since it is becoming more sensitive to the accounting scam of placing PFI projects (and SFT) outside the stated borrowing of the government, and this could expose the high borrowing levels in the UK currently unaccounted for. Socialists should be clear that the SFT represents a continuation of privatisation. The SNP is currently without an elected opposition to its left to make this case. Our task is therefore to articulate this opposition and galvanise public opinion against privatisation. ■

Gerry McCartney is a GP in Renfrewshire and the SSP's economics spokesperson

a flow of problems

Antonio Ioris argues that where the Water Framework Directive should have been about social need and good management, money has skewed the debate

In the last few years, water management has been changing from rigid rules and prescriptive controls in favour of more flexible and comprehensive responses. In the European Union, water management has been in a process of rapid transformation, particularly after the approval in 2000 of the Water Framework Directive (WFD). The Directive has important repercussions for water use and conservation and brings additional demands to official agencies and concerned stakeholders. The introduction of the new regulatory regime is not immune from controversy and disputes but, on the contrary, it has spurred a growing politicisation of water management issues. As in the rest of Europe, the introduction of water reforms in Scotland has been a contested experience in which private and public sectors clash and collaborate according to multiple agendas. Its close association with political devolution further amplifies the politicisation of water reforms in Scotland. After nearly three centuries of a monolithic government system, a Scottish administration holds, since 1999, control over a range of public matters. Environmental regulation is one of the devolved areas of public administration, which means overseeing WFD in one third of the British territory. Yet there are still overlaps and uncertainties in many areas directly or indirectly related to the environment, as in the case of energy generation (e.g. hydropower), where public policies are still a prerogative of London, but planning authorisations are decided in Edinburgh.

The transition from a previously centralised UK government to a re-established Scottish administration has had important political, material and symbolic consequences for dealing with water problems in Scotland. Before Devolution, it was significantly more difficult to reform the Scottish law due to a shortage of parliamentary time (in Westminster). After Devolution, the restricted importance of Scottish issues in the UK political arena is now compensated by the mobilisation of time and resources in the Scottish Parliament. Crucially, the coincidence between the approval of WFD in the European Union and the reinvention of the Scottish administration has favoured the exploitation of water reforms as a strategic political asset. By cleverly articulating a sense of national pride around the introduction of the water legislation, the young parliamentary structure tried to ascertain its political vision and operative efficiency. The fact that, in 2003, Scotland was the first region to translate WFD into national legislation was praised as a proof that the infant public sector can do things 'faster and better'. Not only the possibility to tailor the legislation to the Scottish needs has improved, but the mechanisms of political representation also changed considerably. The focus of stakeholder mobilisation shifted from London to Edinburgh, prompting a new range of alliances and cooperation around parliamentary activities. The involvement of key stakeholder groups played an important role in shaping the new legislation, but without necessarily resulting into stronger democratic representation. On the contrary, lobbying and bargaining have exposed a highly controlled process of collective learning and public involvement.

Scotland has historically been a divided country, a nation characterised by splits between Highlands and Lowlands, west and east, urban and rural, Protestants and Catholics, all factors that work to dissipate Scottish national identity and compromise its future prospects. In the decades that preceded devolution, economic and political disputes led to an aggravation of social and geographical divisions. Amid such important challenges, devolution represented a unique opportunity to recreate Scottish territorial unity by changing legal, symbolic and administrative configurations. As pointed out by Erik Swyngedouw, the resurrection of the regional and local scales of governance is part of the broader myth of 'globalisation' that junks existing spatial configurations and scales of governance and produces new ones in the process. Due to the political synergies between WFD and Devolution, water management reforms became an important component of a 'double scissor' of territorialisation and deterritorialisation. To be sure, water management needs to be territorialised, given the unique geographical characteristics of regions and catchments. The territorial management of water should, therefore, reflect local social and environmental circumstances without becoming the object of exogenous political expedients. However, the legitimating demands of the newborn Scottish State have given rise to a politically asymmetric territorialisation of the water reforms. Instead of an even-handed reform, which focused on ecological and social goals, the introduction of WFD in Scotland has intensified long-term divisions, to the detriment of its formal objectives of sustainable water management.

The asymmetry associated with the water reforms is evident from the fact that the stronger groups of water users (hydropower, water industry, distilleries, larger farmers, etc.) and stronger economic regions (industrial areas, whisky production valleys, tourism hotspots, irrigation clusters, etc.) have been able to exert sustained pressure in decisive moments of WFD implementation. The influence of stronger players has been instrumental to contain the possibilities and prospects of the new regulatory regime. Because of its emblematic relevance, the implementation of WFD should have triggered a proper accountability for the mistakes created in the past by the private appropriation of common water resources. However, the tacit agreement between stronger groups and the State apparatus has maintained the reforms within narrow objectives. Instead of allowing effective solutions to long-term impacts, the asymmetric territorialisation of water reforms has meant only restricted adjustments and circumscribed changes in existing activities. In practice, rather than restoring the quality of the water environment per se and for the benefit of the entire nation, the new regulation aims mainly the rectification of problems in areas with marked economic or political importance.

The politically asymmetric territorialisation of water management is constantly reinforced by the mechanisms of public involvement in the WFD implementation. It is in the spirit of WFD the increase the degree of stakeholder involvement, based on the principle that decisions should be taken at the level of administration

that is 'as close as possible to the citizen'. However, the governance mechanisms conferred by devolution transferred responsibilities from London to Edinburgh without cascading the decision power to the lower, local level of decision-making (i.e. catchment settlements and smaller towns). As it happened, stakeholders have participated mainly via the restricted space of public consultations. Although there is a duty to consider the representations made during the consultation, the government has ample discretion to accept or reject any suggestion. The situation is common in other parts of Europe, where public involvement has been manipulated according to political interests, without really moving European citizens much 'closer' to environmental regulation. Likewise, other opportunities for public involvement, related to the preparation of the River Basin Management Plans, similarly replicate the same biased pattern of public involvement. Apart from the one-sided decisions about the membership in the discussion groups (participants are selected by a 'structured approach' adopted by the Scottish Environment Protection Agency - SEPA), the role of the participants is merely consultative and their inputs are limited to fine-tuning the production of the RBMP. Members are invited to engage (and validate) a structured form of public involvement, on SEPA's own terms, whilst the majority of the catchment population and smaller organisations remain either unaware of the procedures or lack means to take part in the process. It means that the involvement of the public is being, once more, reduced to a series of meetings with a fixed schedule of activities.

The tacit importance assigned to WFD in Scotland has been instrumental to reduce the anomy and suspicion of the general public about the new regulation. As in other countries, public involvement has become an element of propaganda and political legitimisation. However, the recurrent emphasis on the importance of WFD to Scotland conceals the historical causes of environmental problems and the asymmetric balance of power. Water reforms have ultimately become entangled with the reaffirmation of the 'Scottish myth' (cf. David McCrone), according to which there is an inherent egalitarianism among the Scots. The myth is in direct contradiction with a highly unequal society that has failed to achieve minimal levels of civilised life to all its members. It is not because environmental laws improved after devolution that environmental management necessarily changed on the ground. On the contrary, if it is true that WFD raised awareness about water problems, serious barriers remain unresolved or were discursively magnified. The problem is demonstrated by the limited opportunities for the creative involvement of water stakeholders.

Another important area of contention is the assessment of environmental impacts and formulation of solutions. WFD is, by definition, a 'framework' type of legislation, which means that it systematises the direction that European countries should follow. Within reasonable technical boundaries, member countries can interpret the Directive requirements in order to restore water bodies to 'good ecological status'. If the current condition deviates from good status, a series of measures must be in place to guarantee environmental restoration by 2015. The regime seems supple enough, but the devil here is in the detail: only those measures that are 'proportionate' and 'feasible' are legally enforced. Because the regulators can only impose (economically) informed and (politically) defensible conditions to water users, there is a legitimate route for the avoidance or, at least, minimisation of the financial costs associated to mitigation measures. The use of 'rational' analytical tools to

justify positioned water management decisions is certainly not new in Scotland, but the disputes about proportional and disproportional mitigation costs has further immersed the WFD agenda in a highly monetised game. If during the Industrial Revolution water became a source and repository of private profits, the WFD regime has established that the management of water should be based on a rational and cost-effective mitigation of impacts. That is argued despite the fact that there is no empirical evidence that monetisation really improves environmental management. On the contrary, the economic exacerbation of water is ultimately an attempt to solve the historical problems of commodification via additional processes of nature commodification. The 'cash nexus' (cf. John B. Foster) inevitably leads to an exacerbation of the economic features of managed water systems, at the expense of other social and cultural dimensions.

The reform of water management in Scotland has provided an invaluable opportunity to grasp the connections between territorial politics, environmental vulnerability and economic pressures. The reliance on the generic assessment of ecological processes and the quick-fix solution to long-term impacts betray the technocratic basis of the new water management approaches. That is directly related to the hegemonic discourse of 'free markets' and private ownership of natural resources. In effect, the dominant forms of dealing with water remain bound by market assumptions about how nature operates and what purpose it serves. The economic imperatives behind water use inevitably lead to a wasteful consumption of water and water-related resources, such as electricity, which has been rarely questioned during the introduction of the new regulatory regime. The best that WFD can offer is a search for efficiency and rationalisation, ignoring the difficult questions about the ultimately need to expand domestic or industrial water demand. Needless to say that such a movement is in accordance with the prominence given by Devolution to economic growth and private business interests.

Overall, the WFD approaches to water management in Scotland have been greatly constrained by the political and economic priorities of devolution, which tend to overlook the long chain of connections between problems at the catchment level and processes operating at broader geographical scales. While most user sectors (agriculture is the exception) are likely to increase significantly the use of water during the implementation of WFD, the new regulation is incapable of dealing with the close relationship between poor water quality and social deprivation in other marginalised areas. As pointed out by Robert Frodeman, today policies embodies positivist and proceduralist biases "in that it seeks to rationalise and make more efficient the expression of our values, while abstaining from the project of making these values themselves more reasonable". Although some localised and patchy improvements are expected as result of WFD, the introduction of an economic-based regulation will continue to raise tensions and contradictions. So far, the key outcomes of the WFD experience have been an unnecessary complexification of water management and the widespread use of the money language. If in the past, water development was responsible for serious disruptive interventions (e.g. dam construction), the contemporary water reforms have refuelled conflicts and deepened uncertainties. ■

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review

Reclaiming the Economy: Alternatives to Market Fundamentalism in Scotland and Beyond

Scottish Left Review Press, 2007, £9.99

As a matter for public discussion and debate, 'the Scottish economy' has rarely enjoyed a higher profile. The new Scottish Government has decided that sustainable economic growth will be its defining Purpose (with a capital P). The First Minister has appointed a Council of Economic Advisers and is in the process of establishing a National Economic Forum. Politicians and commentators constantly invoke experience from around the world to highlight lessons for Scotland to learn. All the major political parties happily predict that the relatively minor changes to public policy they propose at the Scottish national level can dramatically improve GDP growth. Indeed, the Scottish Government's confidence is reflected in the new target regime established in its recently published Economic Strategy.

However, as we enter the year 2008, Scotland's trade unions continue to be dismayed by much of what passes for debate on the Scottish economy. Shrill lobbying on marginal issues by a plethora of business organisations jockeying for position post-devolution has produced a culture where debate is very narrowly focused. Orthodoxies around taxation, regulation and the size of the public sector have emerged and become ingrained despite being founded on little or no evidence. Analysis is selective and distorted through highly politicised prisms to support policy positions that are fundamentally ideological in nature. Given this sorry context, the publication of **Reclaiming the Economy: alternatives to market fundamentalism in Scotland and beyond** edited by Andy Cumbers and Geoff Whittam should be enthusiastically welcomed by all who aspire to a more balanced discussion about Scotland's economic future. It is refreshing, and unfortunately rather unusual, to read authors prepared to challenge prevailing economic orthodoxies. Far too seldom do we read authors prepared seriously to examine important but profoundly unfashionable issues such as public ownership.

The book has emerged from two conferences held by the Alternative Economic Strategy Network in 2004 and 2006 and its fourteen chapters focus on four broad themes:

- Economic development;
- The growing power of multinational corporations;
- The relations between the public sector and the wider economy; and,
- The corroding impact of market forces on communities

The chapters vary quite markedly in style, tone and quality but the contributions are characterised by a laudable willingness to challenge current economic development policy frameworks and implementation strategies. At a time when precious little rigorous work on the Scottish economy is being undertaken in our universities, perhaps the most welcome aspect of the book is that the majority of the chapters focus on specifically Scottish experiences. However the lessons drawn from these experiences can surely be applied well beyond Scotland's borders.

The book is at its best when contributors concentrate on outlining new pathways to better policies rather than criticising the status quo. For instance, the topical issue of public procurement is addressed by Roberta Sonnino and Kevin Morgan in the chapter 'Localising the Economy: the untapped potential of green procurement'. In Scotland, the procurement agenda has been dominated by two somewhat contradictory imperatives: to make the spending of nearly £9 billion per annum by the public sector as efficient as possible and to open up opportunities for Scottish SME's. Sustainable procurement continues to be the poor relation. The chapter describes the success of East Ayrshire Council's school meals programme which improved the Scottish Government's Hungry for Success initiative by adopting the Soil Association's Food for Life standards. The result? An effective and sustainable local solution to the long-standing problem of poor quality school meals. However, as the authors' note, good practice is a 'notoriously bad traveller' and the trick is now to ensure that success in East Ayrshire is replicated throughout Scotland. Sonnino and Morgan's robust conclusions should help in this respect. They argue persuasively that strong and creative political leadership is key to successful green procurement strategies and also that suppliers must play their part by committing to the long-term approach. 'Localisation' is a long term process not an event and although it may be a necessary condition for a sustainable economic development strategy, it is not sufficient.

In his chapter 'Economic Democracy and Public Ownership' Andy Cumbers reminds us of the limitations of past modes of public ownership and, with reference to the Scottish energy sector, suggests ways in which these could be addressed in an alternative publicly owned model. He correctly identifies a major emerging political issue: how long can private ownership of utilities be defended in a world where climate change and environmental degradation are important, if not the most important, political issues? Assuming that there will be an increasing disenchantment with private ownership Cumbers provides a compelling case for a new model of public ownership that is accountable and decentralised with a pivotal role for workers in decision making.

In her excellent (it is impossible not to react positively to a chapter that has 'conviviality' as a sub-heading!) chapter 'Climate Change and the bioregional economy', Molly Scott Cato agrees that globalisation is the process by which our economy has been expropriated but, more positively, suggests that climate change

Given the sorry context of economic debate in Scotland, the publication of this book should be enthusiastically welcomed by all who aspire to a more balanced discussion about Scotland's economic future

now 'gives us a unique opportunity to reclaim that economy and redirect it in the service of all the world's people'. It is encouraging that more and more people regard climate change as an opportunity to change the way modern economies are organised. Although Cato doesn't address ownership explicitly, the clear implication of her call for a bioregional approach to local economic development is that ownership structures will inevitably change. In any case, as Cato argues, "locally embedded economies have real relationships with those whom their activities affect and this can help to build in responsibility". Her chapter should serve as a wake-up call to all those politicians who flippantly use the word 'sustainable' as a meaningless companion to economic growth.

Whilst too many politicians are prepared to throw around the concept of sustainability with little regard to the true cost of their policies, even less rigour is applied to the current debate over taxation. Therefore, Mike Danson and Geoff Whittam's chapter 'Using the Tax System Under Devolution to Address the Effects of Poverty in Scotland' is a welcome, indeed necessary, evidence-based contribution. Danson and Whittam correctly identify that trickle-down mythology continues to underpin the UK's regressive tax system and propose a Scottish Service Tax as a "practical, progressive and redistributive replacement for the Council Tax". Their proposals will be familiar to many and have already been the subject of much debate and disagreement, not least within the trade union movement. But this is no bad thing. What we desperately require in Scotland is a higher quality of debate informed by evidence based contributions such as this. Only from this process will effective policy emerge. Other important contributions include Robert McMaster's on health, Sarah Glynn's on housing and Gerry Mooney and Gill Scott on poverty. The space is not available here to do them all justice.

I would offer two main criticisms of the book. The first is that too many chapters focus on analysing problems of market fundamentalism rather than offering clear alternatives. For instance, Prem Sikka is an informed and cogent critic of the role and power of corporations. His chapter 'Taming the Corporations' provides an acute description of the nefarious role played by corporations in driving down standards across the economy. Unfortunately, his proposals for 'taming' this activity are crammed into the concluding paragraphs. The chapter would surely have been more interesting if Sikka dispensed with the context setting (we know that corporations behave badly don't we?) and focused firmly on an alternative regulatory framework. Similarly, the balance is again wrong in Danny MacKinnon's chapter 'Towards an alternative economic development strategy for Scotland' which is basically a critique of the economic development policy framework and implementation strategy established by the last Scottish administration. Much of the analysis is fair and his criticisms of the tax-cutting agenda beloved of so many Scottish politicians are particularly relevant. However, the chapter fails to live up

to its title. It isn't really good enough to suggest an alternative strategy simply by reference to the weaknesses of the present framework.

A second criticism is that the book does not address many of the key economic debates currently raging in Scotland. The issues that dominate public policy discourse on the Scottish economy are either absent (the constitution, fiscal autonomy) or



tackled tangentially (business taxation, employment legislation or 'red-tape' as the tired euphemism would have it). Admittedly, it is somewhat unfair to raise this as a criticism when the editors openly admit in their introductory chapter that there are gaps within the book. The editors are clear that the book is part of ongoing work around the alternative economic strategy and cite more detailed work on national macroeconomic policy in the context of a global economy as a priority. At a time when PFI/PPP and the new Scottish Government's alternative the Scottish Futures Trust are being examined by the Parliament's Finance Committee, it is a particular shame that the funding of capital investment has been overlooked. The book would have benefited greatly from an assessment of alternative mechanisms. However, on a similar theme, Christine Cooper and Phil Taylor do provide a forensic demolition of the rationale for prison privatisation.

In his recent book 'Making Globalisation Work' Joseph Stiglitz notes that free market fundamentalist beliefs have persisted "even as economic research has undermined their intellectual foundations". It is exasperating that too many politicians in Scotland remain locked in a late-1970s US supply side economics bubble. **Reclaiming the Economy** provides a kick up the backside to those still lazily adhering to redundant ideology. The new thinking contained in this book is urgently required if the Scottish economy is to be developed to meet the needs of all our citizens. We need to challenge orthodoxy if we are to build a society where the fruits of sustainable economic growth are broadly shared with those who create that growth each day of their working lives. To do this we must endeavour to create an economic architecture that reconnects the economy to the living standards of all, not just to residents of the penthouse. **Reclaiming the Economy** might not constitute a blueprint for such an alternative strategy but it certainly provides a number of important contributions towards the creation of a genuinely new approach to the Scottish economy.

The book is dedicated to one of its contributors Peter Bain who sadly died whilst the final preparations were being made its publication. Along with his long-time collaborator Phil Taylor, Peter contributed the chapter on 'Trade Union Responses to Call Centre Offshoring'. Reclaiming the Economy does Peter's memory justice and that is perhaps the highest complement it can be paid. ■

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web review

Henry McCubbin

Can anyone make any sense of Pakistan Politics? We are told that Benazir Bhutto is fighting for democracy then discover that, like our absolute monarchs of old, she wishes to rule from beyond the grave. Sometimes it is best to go to official web sites and try to measure official statements against that which is reported in our media, or lengthier pieces from know experts on the topic.

In Pakistan's case www.infopak.gov.pk will provide you with the press statements from the executive. In fact the announcement, by Pervez Musharif on this web site, that he would allow British police in to aid with their inquiry in to Bhutto's assassination was apparently the first that our officials knew of it. It is important to note that the access being offered from Musharif does not allow for an independent inquiry merely assistance in the investigation under the control for Musharif's security forces. Official statements like the above usually need to provide politicians with wriggle room. In other words they appear to be saying one thing but could have another two or three meanings. The inquiry into Dr David Kelly's death lead Mr Hutton to conclude that following the remit of his inquiry it was the BBC to blame! Who could blame the Pakistan President's preference for the

UK's Government, which was responsible for such a perfect outcome, to come to his aid in this case?

Another official site useful on these occasions is our old friend the CIA at www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/pk.html where basic statistics and information are kept in an up-to-date manner.

A private service which is in the market to sell security briefings in the market place is the USA site www.stratfor.com. They have a public site and a pay for site for their briefings but always remember their ideological background.

Finally, for information provided from writers with a deeper knowledge than the general press, magazines such as the London Review of Books has an essay by Tariq Ali titled "Daughter of the West" which with remarkable prescience appeared in the middle of December. It can be found at www.lrb.co.uk/v29/n24/ali_01_.html.

Reading it provides some understanding to the events unfolding today. ■

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Kick Up The Tabloids

2008 IS THE NEW 2007

2007 was a year of comebacks, a year of scandals and a year when Scottish pride (not the bread) and self-belief were partially restored. The year ended with comeback gigs from Led Zeppelin (the drums were played by the late John Bonham's son and even **he** looked too old to be doing the gig!) and the Spice Girls (where Posh's bits were sung by what looked like a barely-convincing Thunderbirds-type puppet) and corruption scandals involving politicians as wholesome and self-righteous as Wendy Alexander (throughout the entire episode, the part of Wendy was played by one of the cast of the Muppet Show)

In no small part, the growth of our own sense of nationhood was down to the gallant efforts of the Scotland football team, their attempt to qualify for the 2008 European Championships ending in glorious failure. I think all Scots should take pride in our ability to do Glorious Failure better than anybody else. However, having lost to Italy and failed to qualify, we were down on the floor. Gutted, inconsolable, our dreams and hopes shattered. For four whole days. Until England lost to Croatia and also failed to qualify. Suddenly the whole national mood in Scotland was lifted once again. You can't keep us down for long!

But our sense of self-belief was also on the rise due to the momentous event of the elections for the Scottish Parliament. I think in years to come all of us will remember where we were on May 3rd 2007, that day when the people of Scotland spoke with one voice. And that voice of the people of Scotland unanimously said: "Did I vote? I'm not sure, I think I might have spoiled my paper by accident. Was it meant to be a tick next to the one you wanted, and then 1, 2, 3 for the others you don't want?" Things were already reaching farcical proportions during the BBC's live coverage, when with perfect comic timing, a caption appeared on screen stating that "the count in Edinburgh West has been delayed due to an attack on a polling station by an intruder with a golf club". What a particularly Edinburgh form of protest. In Paisley, a baseball bat would probably have been wielded. However, it is a sign as to how disenfranchised Tory voters are now feeling that they have to resort to direct action with the aid of their mashie.

The election marked a remarkable comeback for Alex Salmond. Now our First Minister, Eck is promising us all a referendum on independence in the life of this parliament. I think it may be a bit naïve to think that winning a referendum will necessarily lead to independence. History suggests the British don't give colonies up without a fight. America had to fight a war of independence, as did Ireland. Indian independence was partly brought about because Ghandi went on hunger strike. I can't see Alex Salmond going on a hunger strike.

For every comeback, there was a departure. Scotland rejoiced in June with the resignation of Tony Blair, that bloke who was really English but pretended to have some Scottish roots, to be replaced by Gordon Brown, that guy who is really Scottish but bangs on endlessly about how British he is. Blair's last years were mired in scandal, from Iraq to cash for honours, yet it took him an eternity to resign. TV coverage of him leaving Downing St seemed to go on for about a week. Fortunately, this happened during Wimbledon so it was easy to channel-hop between the two events. And it occurred to me at the time that Tony Blair was very much the Tim Henman of politics.... Popular and promising ten years ago, but it all ending up in a sorry anti-climax.... With some goofy, awkward-looking Scottish guy wanting to take his place.

2007 was a year, however, when the occasional act of principle happened. For example, Edinburgh University decided in the summer to strip Robert Mugabe of his honorary degree. Which should put an end to his appalling behaviour. After all, how can any self-respecting dictator expect to be able to commit acts of genocide on his own people without the necessary qualifications. Where was Hitler after his Art O-grade was cancelled? 2007 was, of course, the year when Scotland grabbed the World stage through our have-a-go-hero approach to international terrorism. Global TV audiences looked on aghast as our new national hero John Smeaton dived on a burning man at Glasgow Airport. While at home most of us were watching our TV's thinking "Violence in this country is getting out of hand. Only in Glasgow can being on fire be no protection from getting attacked".

Towards the end of the year, Tommy Sheridan, no stranger to scandal of course, was arrested, after an 18-month investigation into alleged perjury, carried out by Lothian and Borders Police. Which goes to show how little real crime there must be in Edinburgh. They should be cracking down on the real gangsters, laundering money through tanning salons and the like. And as the year ended, Big Eck the saviour buggered off to Birmingham while Fat Eck, the other saviour, had to answer searching questions about his association with comb-over tycoon and all-round megalomaniac Donald Trump. There were suggestions of favours being done. Wrongly in my opinion. Let's face it, the guy can't afford a decent wig, so he's hardly going to be splashing out money on bribes.

Finally, as 2008 dawned, our newest national hero Kenny Richey returned home after 21 years on death row, which is nearly as bad as ten months in Shotts (the town, not the prison). Obviously, tabloid papers will be waving fat cheques at him to sell his story. Although Kenny himself seems perfectly happy to live off that cash he invested in the Northern Rock in 1986.

Happy New Year!



Reclaiming the **ECONOMY**

Alternatives to Market Fundamentalism
in Scotland and beyond

edited by **Andy Cumbers and Geoff Whittam**

The takeover of the economic policy agenda by business corporations and their supporters in the political mainstream is one of the defining characteristics of the age. The 'free' market, trade liberalisation, privatisation and the protection of property rights now dominate the concerns of our political classes and the opinion formers who influence them, with only lip service paid to labour rights, social inequality and the environment. Challenging the dominant policy agenda, the contributors to this book argue for the construction of a more humane and sustainable economy.

The book develops a set of alternative visions, which both de-couple discussions of the economy from vested corporate interests and ask more fundamental questions about what an economy should be for and who it should serve. Departing from mainstream policy and economics orthodoxy, it is geared towards building a radical left agenda, yet, at the same time, one that is grounded in a practical politics. This book emerges from a particular initiative within Scotland, the Alternative Economic Strategy Network, bringing together progressive academics, trade unionists and activists to debate and explore alternatives to neo-liberalism and mainstream economics.

Reflecting this 'local' context, some of the papers develop critiques and policies directed at the Scottish public policy agenda, whilst others have a more general application. But all seek to contribute to a broader global vision challenging the free market fundamentalism of our time.