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SHOULD UNIONS ORGANISE COMMUNITIES?
SECRET SUCCESSES OF THE GENERAL STRIKE

• SURVEILLANCE AND THE LEFT
• GAZA'S ROADMAP TO NOWHERE

THE CHOICES OF TOMORROW





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Mick Whelan, general secretary

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Kevin Lindsay, ASLEF's organiser in Scotland

RMT THE UNION FOR TRANSPORT WORKERS

RMT SCOTLAND OFFICE
180 HOPE STREET
GLASGOW
G2 2UE

0141 332 1117



RMT SCOTLAND ORGANISERS

Mick Hogg M.Hogg@rmt.org.uk

Ann Joss A.Joss@rmt.org.uk

Gordon Martin Gordon.Martin@rmt.org.uk



WWW.RMT.ORG.UK/JOIN



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CONTRIBUTORS AND CREDITS

Contributors

Brian Boyd is Emeritus Professor at the School of Education, University of Strathclyde.

Dylan Brewerton-Harper is a PhD student in sociology at the University of Glasgow studying photographic responses to deindustrialisation in Glasgow and Leipzig. He is affiliated with the research project 'Deindustrialisation and the Politics of Our Time' (DePOT) based out of Concordia University, Montreal.

Phil Chetwynd is an erstwhile clinical psychologist who took up photography when he retired some 25 years ago. He is a member of the Network of Photographers for Palestine.

Roz Foyer is the General Secretary of the Scottish Trades Union Congress.

Daniele-Hadi Irandoost is a doctoral researcher in sociology at the University of Glasgow whose work examines public oversight of intelligence-driven surveillance.

Allie Kerper is a poet, editor and trade union activist based in Edinburgh.

Henry Maitles is Emeritus Professor at the School of Education, University of the West of Scotland.

Charlie McCarthy is Chair of Unison Forth Valley Health Branch.

Peter McColl is a writer and thinker. He was Rector of the University of Edinburgh 2012-15 and has a wide range of interests from data and technology to public participation in policy.

Ian McGregor has been an Edinburgh firefighter for over 20 years, and an Fire Brigades Union rep for most of that time.

Karren Morrison is the Branch Secretary of UNISON Forth Valley Health Branch

Kieran Murphy researches literature at Northern Michigan University.

Ngan Nguyen is a Vietnamese-born author who writes both stories and poetry, currently living in the UK. Her short stories have been published in Vietnam, Scotland and Singapore. She received her Mlit in Creative Writing from the University of Aberdeen and the 2021 Mentoring award from the Wigtown book festival.

David William Parry is a writer, poet and theatre practitioner whose plays have been staged using methods associated with poor theatre.

Jean Rafferty is the author of Foul Deeds Will Rise, She is chair of peace charity, Dove Tales

Tommy Sheppard is the former SNP MP for Edinburgh East, and until recently was chair of the Stand Comedy Club.

Finn Smyth is a researcher at the University of Oxford, focusing on the political economy of the British state. He previously worked as a communications officer for Progressive International.

Chris Sutherland is a lifelong socialist, living in Cupar. He is a member of the Palestinian Solidarity Campaign

Amber Ward is a writer and researcher.

Credits

Editor: **Cailean Gallagher**
editor@scottishleftreview.scot

Design: **Lois Paton**
loispatondesign@gmail.com

Cover art: **Catriona Goss**
@catrionaribena

The Scottish Left Review is a bi-monthly magazine that provides a place for thought and discussion on the Left.

Editorial Committee:
Stephen Smellie (Convenor)
Maggie Chapman (Vice-Convenor)
Bob Thomson
Bill Bonnar
Bill Ramsay
Gordon Morgan
Stephanie Martin
Coll McCail
Kay Sillars

scottishleftreview.scot/subscribe
contact@scottishleftreview.scot

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on Hillington Road, Glasgow

Pitch contributions to the editor at:
editor@scottishleftreview.scot

Correction: The article 'Buying Time for Other People' in issue 150 stated that Kriss Donald was "murdered as part of a gangland feud". This sentence has been retracted and the article amended to avoid the possible implication that Kriss Donald had any connection to gangs. We apologise to the Donald family for any offence or distress the original wording might have caused.

EDITORIAL: MANCHESTERISM IS NO MOVEMENT

When the King of the North raised Anas Sarwar to the House of Lords, it was hardly going to provoke much protest. Gone are the days when Labour socialists could stem the hypocrisy and opportunism of Scottish Labour's leadership. Sarwar, one-time Lords abolitionist, who failed to convince Scots during the last election that voting Labour had nothing to do with Keir Starmer's leadership, has got his unelected peerage.

Sinecures aside, few readers will be disappointed to see Burnham replace Keir Starmer. He has announced good social policies and positive reforms. Yet from £2 bus fares to homelessness-reducing measures, most of these policies will not affect Scotland. His most consequential message for Scotland has been the hint that he might expand oil and gas production. Meanwhile, his desire for a Glasgow metro mayor is being eyed suspiciously and his further devolution messaging rings hollow. "The people of Dundee feel just as distant from Holyrood as from Westminster", he said. Do they, aye? At least Scottish Labour's new leader will be chosen by a competition rather than a coronation. But as the contenders make their pitch, they seem to see the challenge more as finding a long-lost path than forging a new way forward, or stemming the growing appeal of far-right politics for the working class.

If we leave Labour's leadership policies and processes to one side and look at the ideology of the new Prime Minister, what do we see? Is there a promise of empowerment and hope in this time when the forests are on fire, and far right forces are on the streets? Burnham has talked about "business-friendly socialism", but Sarwar's appointment as a business minister perhaps tells us something about what this might involve. Manchesterism is founded on the mantra of governors getting up in the morning and making life better for the masses. It is heavily laden with a paternalism and moral mission. It is reminiscent more of liberal nineteenth-century Mancunian philanthropy than Manchester workers' struggle from below. Some will be glad to have a prime minister who uses the s-word. But business-friendly socialism is a solution without a struggle, a mission without a movement.

There was no Mamdani-style upswell of community and trade union campaigning that must accompany any regime change if it is going to take on vested power and interests. What confidence can there be that Andy's cheery chappie personality is a threat to the balance of power? Maybe he will deliver something. But the responsibility of the left is to be sceptical of personality shifts, of the man with a plan, of reasons to be cheerful that are not backed up by reckoning with power, capital, or forces fanning the far right.

This is also part of the problem with mayors. It is the great (wo)man theory of municipal government. While Glasgow City Council is not exactly the Paris commune, vesting power in a collective comes closer to democracy than metro-presidentialism. A BBC news article on the mayor debate suggested that Glaswegians' inability to recognise the council leader means there is less accountability. Well, to misquote Ben Franklin, those who would give up essential agency, to gain a little accountability, deserve neither and risk losing both. The more concentrated power becomes, the less potential that grassroots organisations, groups and movements have to impact politics.

And so this issue is not preoccupied with probing the new Prime Minister's policy package, but turns to the principles of building mass politics, and the importance of the longer historical struggles and movements that outlast fleeting premierships. It looks

to the constant evolution of class consciousness, struggle and solidarity, as well as the maintenance of democratic and collective power among the working class. The ramping up of the right, and the weakness of the left, bring the need to refocus efforts on building labour and community power, informed by stronger days. The left has to size up the far right forces that are uncompromising in their pitch for white working class allegiance. The crisis of the today is the challenge of tomorrow.

In our first section, Roz Foyer of the STUC explains why this context means that unions have a duty to contribute to building the power and advancing the rights of migrants, while Karren Morrison and Charlie McCarthy from Forth Valley UNISON discuss the motivation and the challenge of the new Trade Unions in Communities hub in Falkirk. If these demonstrate how unions are adapting to the new forces on the ground, Daniele-Hadi Irandoost and David William Parry address how unions also need to play the air game, and pay attention to ways that surveillance affect their long term capacity. Unions' strengths and vulnerabilities in the face of established power are studied in Amber Ward's essay on the General Strike, while Finn Smyth looks for the limited evidence of working class power in Scottish Labour history, and Allie Kerper's review of *Shall Roger Casement Hang?* explores the challenges that face individuals who navigate between the establishment and the fight for freedom.

One theory for the relative weakness of the working class is that young workers lack the collectivism of prior generations. Dylan Brewerton-Harper's interview with Janice McGarry, the first female shipbuilding apprentice, calls back to a time when injustice and discrimination was met with a strong and sustained challenge from the unions. Henry Maitles and Brian Boyd argue that while democratic rights and citizenship are part of the curriculum, they are falling by the wayside. Kieran Murphy discusses the inescapable prevalence of what Marxists call alienation, and Ngan Nguyen's story of a refugee's journey reminds us of all those in Scotland who have travelled or worked 'illegally' and are treated as aliens by the state and the courts – but who, as Karren Morrison suggests, may be the trade unionists of the future. As *Odyssey* watchers know, the sacred law of xenia required all strangers and travellers to be treated with hospitality, because they might be gods. Scottish unions would do well to treat all migrants with solidarity, for they might one day be stewards of the movement.

It is a movement also fighting on the environmental front, from the erosion of working class communities by the kinds of economic development that Peter McColl describes in Torry, to the fires ripping through our cities and countryside which the firefighters are underequipped to fight, as Phil Chetwynd and Ian McGregor explain.

In our latter pages, we turn our focus internationally. Chris Sutherland dissects the Board of Peace's dead-end plan for Gaza, while Jean Rafferty offers a window into the oppressive turn of the education curriculum in Afghanistan. And last but certainly not least, Tommy Sheppard pays tribute to satirist-par-excellence Paul Sneddon, a.k.a. Vladimir McTavish, whose wit and wisdom shone from the inside back page of our magazine for decades, and who sadly passed away this summer. In his spirit, while there is much work to be done, let's do it with good humour and a glint in our eyes.

WHY THE LEFT MUST TREAT SURVEILLANCE AS A WORKERS' ISSUE

Trade unions already confront employers using data to monitor work. **Daniele-Hadi Irandoost** and **David William Parry** argue that the left must also challenge the surveillance of workers as political actors by the state.

In 1984, Margaret Thatcher's government ordered employees of Government Communications Headquarters, better known as GCHQ, to surrender their trade union membership. Fourteen workers were eventually dismissed after refusing. Unions campaigned until their rights were restored in May 1997. For thirteen years, national security had acquired a curious enemy: the trade union card carried by a government employee.

State surveillance also fed industrial blacklisting. In 2009, the Information Commissioner's Office uncovered the Consulting Association's database of construction workers. The files recorded union activity, safety complaints and political involvement. Evidence before the Undercover Policing Inquiry raised questions about police intelligence entering blacklisting networks. Some workers discovered the records only after years without work.

A similar connection between corporate interests and political surveillance appeared in Scotland. Rob Evans and Paul Lewis reported in *The Guardian* in 2011 that ScottishPower and other energy companies had hired Vericola, a private security firm to monitor environmental campaign networks.¹ ScottishPower's security operation was led by a former head of Strathclyde Police Special Branch. Political policing methods gave the company warning of opposition to its projects. Corporate access to political intelligence went further. Dave Morris, a London Greenpeace campaigner and one of the two McLibel defendants, told the Undercover Policing Inquiry that an officer inside the group monitored legal advice. The restaurant chain McDonald's had sued campaigners over a leaflet critical of its employment, environmental and business practices.

Such infiltration required an officer to win the confidence of a group. Communications surveillance removes much of that practical burden. Data about calls, messages and online activity can identify recurring contacts and central organisers. Applied across a network, these records can expose the structure of a union branch and reveal preparations for collective action before they are announced. Employer monitoring is therefore only part of the problem. Unions already confront productivity scoring, location tracking and algorithmic management at work. State surveillance concerns workers when they meet, organise and exercise political power beyond it. The practices connect when employers pass information to public authorities or agencies obtain records created through commercial services.

Snowden's Accountability Shock

By 2013, Britain had established commissioners alongside parliamentary and judicial oversight of intelligence power. Edward Snowden, an intelligence contractor working inside the United States surveillance apparatus, disclosed interception and intelligence sharing that official oversight bodies had neither exposed nor effectively constrained. Snowden's disclosures produced the public reckoning that formal oversight had failed to deliver. Intelligence agencies had been supervised under conditions of secrecy while their powers remained beyond democratic judgement.

Commercial platforms had meanwhile become part of political organisation. They offered inexpensive ways for unions, community campaigns and social movements to recruit supporters, publicise meetings and coordinate action. Independent services and encryption demanded technical expertise, administrative work and resources unavailable to many smaller organisations. Much of their internal and public activity therefore passed through systems designed and controlled by commercial providers. Political organisations maintain membership records, prepare legal cases and decide strategy before acting publicly. Their collective privacy depends on retaining control over when these processes become visible. State access transfers that control to an outside institution with powers with which the organisation cannot contend.

Civil-liberties organisations, digital-rights groups and specialist lawyers made the disclosed systems intelligible and challenged their legality. Their work defended individuals subjected to unlawful intrusion. Following this example, the wider left must address surveillance as a method for governing organised opposition.

A Surveillance Law with Room for Union Spying

The Investigatory Powers Bill brought interception, communications data, equipment interference and bulk personal datasets within a single legislative framework. Don't Spy On Us assembled specialists capable of reading powers buried in its language. The coalition was able to challenge particular powers through legal and technical argument. Yet such argument had limited political purchase: it lacked an organised constituency capable of placing collective political association at the centre of the debate. The weakness of the resulting trade union safeguard reflected that absence. The Investigatory Powers Act states that trade union activity is insufficient by itself to establish that surveillance is necessary, yet an agency may still seek authorisation on grounds including national security, serious crime, or economic well-being.

The Investigatory Powers (Amendment) Act 2024 extended the same formulation to government authorisation of intelligence services' access to bulk personal datasets held by companies and other organisations. These datasets can include people not suspected of any offence. Commercial records can reveal union membership, political affiliation and patterns of association even when collected for another purpose. Parliament scrutinised authorisation and safeguards, yet gave far less attention to the effect of placing commercially generated information about organised groups within the intelligence system.

Workers Pay for the Surveillance Economy

Reliance on commercially held data forms part of a wider dependence on private industry. Figures published by Parliament's Intelligence and Security Committee record contractor expenditure rising from £400 million in 2011 to £1.223 billion in 2015/16.² Later reports did not disclose comparable figures, leaving the current to



GCHQ headquarters in Cheltenham. Photo: Adrian Pingstone, 2017. Public domain.

tal unknown. Earlier scrutiny found agencies rehiring former employees as contractors at substantial premiums, showing how the loss of internal expertise deepened commercial dependence.

The reported agreement for Amazon Web Services to host classified material for British intelligence agencies extended outsourcing into basic infrastructure. Estimated at between £500 million and £1 billion over ten years, it made a United States corporation responsible for systems used to store and process classified material.³ Parliament received little information about the terms governing the arrangement. Although Amazon would not have access to the information held on the platform, dependence on its infrastructure gives a private company an enduring role in the operation of the intelligence system.

Workers bear the cost of this arrangement through taxation and communications charges, then become subjects of the surveillance they fund. Bulk surveillance collects information across a population before identifying suspected wrongdoing, and searches it afterwards for significance. Innocence does not necessarily keep anyone's data outside the system.

Former National Security Agency technical director William Binney described the relationship between the agency and its contractors as "incestuous".⁴ He argued that contractors promoted bulk collection because its expense generated further contracts. Britain's expenditure creates conditions in which similar incentives can grow. Technology companies offer no dependable counterweight to government surveillance. Apple resisted a reported British demand concerning encrypted iCloud data, then withdrew Advanced Data Protection from new British users. That resistance produced no enforceable right for workers or unions. Collective privacy cannot depend upon the commercial position a corporation adopts in a particular market.

Security for whose Interests?

Britain and southern Africa occupy unequal positions within the same surveillance order. British agencies collect across borders; southern African states remain targets and importers. Special Branch monitored the Anti-Apartheid Movement for decades, including its work with trade unions. The surveillance of solidarity movements inside Britain formed part of the same imperial relationship through which British intelligence operated abroad. GCHQ monitored South African negotiating positions before the 2009 G20 summit, as well as employees of the South African telecommunica-

tions company MTN, and actors connected to African oil and mineral resources. The intelligence served a British state that was already dominant in finance, diplomacy and extraction.

Southern Africa shows how existing powers develop new political targets. A covert structure inside South Africa's State Security Agency placed unions that had broken with the governing African National Congress under surveillance and penetrated organisations regarded as obstacles to the governing faction. This was a form of pre-emptive authoritarianism. Intelligence identified organisers, sources of finance, and internal disagreements, enabling authorities to isolate leaders, encourage division, or interrupt activity before a movement developed sufficient strength.

South African experience offers a strategy for resistance. Right2Know opposed the Protection of State Information Bill through a coalition of community organisations, social movements, journalists, lawyers and campaign groups. It connected state secrecy to corruption, public services and democratic participation, allowing organisations with different constituencies to recognise surveillance as part of their existing struggles. Legal analysis and technical knowledge were translated into public education, protest and local organising. Right2Know consequently operated as a movement of movements.

In *Democratising Spy Watching*,⁵ Jane Duncan and Allen Munoriyarwa develop this model of oversight from below. Movements gather evidence, educate their members, compare experiences and scrutinise intelligence institutions alongside courts and parliamentary bodies. Britain has many of the necessary organisations, but their work remains divided between civil liberties, labour rights, anti-racism, migrant justice and investigative journalism.

The South African cases also warn against treating present safeguards as guarantees of future restraint. British law has normalised bulk datasets, interception systems and access to commercially held information. A future government could expand their use through routine decisions about warrants and priorities, while existing safeguards fail to place lawful political organisation beyond intelligence attention.

Building Surveillance Counter-Power

The British left needs its own movement of movements against surveillance, combining specialist knowledge with the organised capacity of those most exposed to political policing. None of the existing organisations supplies an adequate response alone. A common programme grounded in political economy should place lawful political organisation beyond intelligence attention, restrict surveillance to evidence-based investigations and challenge the expansion of intelligence power. Learning from South African movements, it must combine formal scrutiny with oversight organised by those subjected to surveillance.

The left needs an independent investigative capacity that can preserve evidence and make specialist findings usable in organising. Trade union organisation inside intelligence agencies is essential to this work, protecting employees who challenge unlawful conduct and revealing decisions beyond the reach of external oversight. Surveillance can disrupt collective action without resorting to overt repression. Unless those targeted can investigate and challenge these practices, each disclosure will pass as an isolated scandal while the system remains intact.

1. Rob Evans and Paul Lewis, "Revealed: How Energy Firms Spy on Environmental Activists," *The Guardian*, 14 February 2011.

2. Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament, *Annual Report 2016–2017*, HC 655 (2017), paras 209–210.

3. Helen Warrell and Nic Fildes, "Amazon Strikes Deal with UK Spy Agencies to Host Top-Secret Material," *Financial Times*, 25 October 2021.

4. Joint Committee on the Draft Investigatory Powers Bill, *Oral Evidence: Draft Investigatory Powers Bill*, HC 651, 6 January 2016, Q240.

5. Jane Duncan and Allen Munoriyarwa, eds., *Democratising Spy Watching: Public Oversight of Intelligence-driven Surveillance in Southern Africa* (Edinburgh: Scottish Universities Press, 2026).

THE BASIC PRINCIPLE OF COMMUNITY ORGANISING

With so many workers outside the protection and power of collectives, unions need to respond, writes STUC General Secretary Roz Foyer.

One of the main criticisms thrown at trade unions by our detractors is that, apparently, we are no longer focused on workplace issues. That campaigning on climate change, international solidarity, supporting disadvantaged and minority communities and standing up for the rights of refugees is somehow damaging to the needs of working class people and to growing the trade union movement.

That's nonsense, of course. We do all of those things and, as the latest ONS statistics have shown, our movement in Scotland is growing. It's up by 10% with more than 683,000 union members in Scotland. We do all of those things and, in 2024, we revealed that workers had won a staggering £4.4 billion in pay and pension settlements over the previous 24 months.

That money did not come from the generosity of employers. It came from workplace organising, collective action and solidarity across our movement to ensure workers received a fairer deal. It is money that bosses, billionaires and bureaucrats simply said did not exist until workers organised themselves in their trade unions and took, or threatened to take, industrial action.

We should celebrate those victories. But we should also recognise that too many workers remain outside the protection and power of collective organisation. Thus, there is a more fundamental question that we need to ask ourselves. The workplace has changed. How do we respond to it?

Rights as a Step to Action

Scotland is no longer the industrial heartland it once was. Workers are increasingly spread across fragmented workplaces, hybrid working patterns, insecure employment and sectors where traditional forms of workplace organising are increasingly difficult.

That does not mean that workplace organising is less important. Quite the opposite. It means that we need to think differently about how we reach people, build confidence and develop collective power.

For too long now power has remained in the hands of those with wealth, assets and resources. It's this emphasis of the neo-liberal – the grab what you can, while you can – attitude that has led, in part, to the alienation of the working classes within their communities. It's those workers we must redouble our efforts to reach and, what's more, we must meet them where they are.

Too many workers are in jobs where they have little or no access to collective bargaining, where insecure contracts and poor conditions are normalised and where the knowledge of their rights is limited. For those workers, knowing their rights – and knowing where to turn when those rights are breached – can be the first step towards collective action.

That is at the heart of Our Rights in Action, the STUC project now starting in South Lanarkshire, Fife and East Ayrshire. The project is about building the capacity of workers and communities to understand their rights, identify the issues that matter to them and develop the collective power needed to change them. For those who don't think that's a space for us – they're wrong. That is a *raison d'être* of trade unions.

Our Rights in Action is about finding the people who want to make a change in their workplaces and communities and giving them the tools, knowledge and support to organise. Crucially, the project can be for those both in and outwith work. It is about mapping where people are, understanding the pressures they face, identifying the organisations and individuals already trying to make a difference and building the relationships that can turn isolated concerns into collective action. It is community organising but stripped back to its most basic principle. Find people who care. Listen to them. Understand the problems they face. Build confidence. Organise and then change things.

The far right understands this and are, regrettably, stealing a march. More to the point, they're quite literally on the march. They understand that there are communities where people feel abandoned. Where decent work has disappeared. Where services have been cut. Where housing is unaffordable. Where people feel that the political system no longer represents them. It takes that legitimate frustration and directs it towards the most vulnerable people in society. It tells working people that their problems are caused by migrants, refugees, minority communities or people who have even less power than they do.

We understand all that too, but we must offer people something different. Because when you rob a community of prospects, people will turn to apathy. When you steal a person's vision of hope, the space that lingers can turn toxic.

Our response cannot simply be to tell people that they are wrong to be angry. People are right to be angry about poverty and poor housing. They are right to be fuming about insecure work, low wages and public services that are increasingly unable to meet their needs. The question is who organises that anger and towards what end?

Our Rights in Action answers it by ensuring people know their employment rights. It means connecting workers and community members with trade unions and trades councils. It means working with community organisations and local leaders. It means identifying the people who are already active and giving them the skills and confidence to bring others with them. It means recognising that a trade union is not simply a place where people go when they have a problem at work. It is a vehicle through which people can build power and improve their lives collectively.

Further, the new Employment Rights Act can give our movement a shot in the arm to ensure workers get access to their rights from day one and that unions can request access to a swathe of, as of yet, unorganised sites to recruit, train, upskill and, above all else, empower workers.

Workers are no longer concentrated in the same factories, services and industrialised workplaces that defined the boom years of our movement. But they are still here. They are in our communities, our towns, our cities and our workplaces and we must go meet them where they are rather than waiting on them to come to us with a passing interest about unions. When we do that, we forge the ties that bond and instil the knowledge that solidarity is worth more than hatred and that the union, not disunity, is what makes us strong.

A MASSIVE BATTLE: ABSOLUTE WARRIORS, PART 2

In the second part of an interview with **Cailean Gallagher** and **Stephen Smellie, Karren Morrison** and **Charlie McCarthy** discuss the pitfalls and potential power of trade union community organising.

“So, we set up the trade unions in the community”

TUIC Falkirk, set up earlier this year on the model of TUIC Craigmillar, represents an initiative by lay trade unionists both to respond to the rise of the far right, and to provide the kind of local street-based support that can build community strength.

While at first support from central union bureaucracies was limited, in the intervening months it has drawn support from the STUC and unions including UNISON. The process has raised important questions about how the unions respond to a changing landscape. “I think people see that the far right is a real and present danger”, Karren explained. “It needs to be responded to really quickly and people need support with it.”

But Karren detects a risk of fatigue among the left resistance, in contrast with the dynamics of some of the small but regular far right network. While far right activity has dwindled, a hard core remains: “These are family groups, these are friend groups, this is their social life, this is probably the best thing that’s ever happened to them. They are on the telly, they’re able to speak, they’re able to abuse people over the other side of the street with impunity.” For Karren, where the motivation for the left to resist comes from duty and often involves fear, for the far right “the problem is they have nothing to gain from it stopping, because they enjoy it.”

One dynamic that remains unclear is whether these niche, self-sustaining networks are being isolated in the community. “From day one”, Charlie explained, “it’s been obvious that there were your professional fascists there, but the vast majority of people were the genuinely concerned, as a result of misinformation”. Much of this was due to the messaging by the far right and fascist groups.

“They tried to claim the ground of being protectors of women and children. And it’s something that’s always on the back burner. It’s not their frontline campaign, but it’s a constant message of protecting women from gender-based violence and so forth. I think tackling that needs to be a priority moving forward now. The trade union movement needs to identify a small number of key things that we do not stray from, and I think that gender based violence has to be one of them”, Charlie suggests. “We cannot let people who are shouting obscenities and threatening violence against women claim that they are the protectors of women.”

But the ramping up of this rhetoric has alienated those closer to the middle ground. “The people who are protesting have alienated the kind of middle grounds, by the Nazi salutes, by the signs, by the abuse. People who might have had genuine concerns, through misinformation, are coming and standing next to somebody who is threatening rape on others. They say, ‘Oh, wait a minute...’. And as it’s got more extreme, the people left are real abusers, who alienate more and more people.”

Karren noticed something else: they all fell out with each other. “The original person who set up it is no longer doing it. Now

they spend more time fighting each other than they do fighting, you know, us. That doesn’t mean that the community doesn’t have sympathy for some of the things they say. I do think people are emboldened to vocalise very racist stuff that they would never have vocalised. But they have also alienated the majority.”

As a movement, then, do unions focus on working class issues, or anti-racist work and education, or messaging around gender based violence? Should the priority be migrant organising, when already there is kickback when unions spend resources for migrant workers. Where does the mandate rest to make these decisions?

For Karren, trade unions in the community is part of the answer. “Trade unions are based in workplaces, but what affects our communities affects our workplace. How do we get people to understand what trade unions are? I think people think they provide some insurance policies. We need to explain why this stuff is our bread and butter. Trade unions have been involved in the fight against fascism for decades. Nobody would have questioned it in the past. Why are people questioning it now?”

Part of making unions relevant links back to the workplace, and involves showing what action looks like. The Serco campaign described in the first part of this interview (see issue 150) is for Karren a good example. “If you go and talk to people and if you spend time engaging with people, you can get them to trust you and to see you as something. We need to do that as trade unions and help people understand what it is we do.”

“Gender-based violence isn’t necessarily the issue that unions are known for, but if we’re engaging in our trade union community hubs with Women’s Aid, or other things around migrant workers, then people will see us as doing all sorts of work. Maybe then we can then start having conversations with people in the community around stuff like that.

“There is a massive battle here. I am terrified that reform is going to drag our politics so far to the right that we’re not getting an opportunity to do this. Often all I see trade unions doing is having debates and conversations. We need to take action, and trade unions in communities is a model here. It might be a disaster, and folk might be asking what we’re doing this for. But we need to do something.

What is a Community?

TUIC Forth Valley is partly based on TUIC in Craigmillar, with a similar constitutional model. But whereas the Lothian TUIC is situated in a very specific area, the Forth Valley setup is different. The hub will not be a separate building as in Craigmillar, but based in UNISON’s shop in Newmarket Street, which is in the centre of Falkirk, opening periodically through the week. People are able to drop in and ask for trade union advice. There is engagement with local groups, referrals to food banks, and support for asylum seekers. For instance, there has been work with local employers to arrange for



Credit: TUIC social media.

asylum seekers to do volunteering work, and to encourage them to organise PVG checks that allow them to do so. “These people may not be our members, but they are future members, because if they can get a volunteer position, and get leave to remain, and get work, then they will be able to join a trade union, and will want to do so because they understand what it does.”

The work of community organising, for Charlie, also has to address the fact that neoliberalism has eaten away at the foundations of the left, and “the adoption of neoliberalism by certain aspects of the trade union movement and socialist movement”. He explains: “in order for neoliberalism to work, they have to destroy the idea of class, which has meant the people who are meant to represent the working class have moved away from that being the key objective. This has allowed a gap for Farage and Reform to come in and say that they are the party that represent working class people. So one of the key things is that we need to have an honest discussion: has neoliberalism worked? Has it worked in full, or in part? And what, if any, has been the damage to trade unions, and to the working class movements in general?”

For Charlie, there needs to be more understanding of what a community is now, post neoliberalism, in order for the unions to tackle racism. “Because it seems obvious what a community was when I was a wee boy. For me, it was the Irish diaspora, or it was the Celtic fans, or the people who went to my school. That was my community, and I know what it was. But now with people retreating behind screens, and finding their own communities online, it is more difficult to define what a modern community is, so that we can start to engage with these modern communities and also taking lessons from when we would lift organisations that came from communities up into the union movement. They effectively became a wing of what we were doing. They gave good advice to their communities. For me, to build trade unions in the community, means training people up in skills so that people can come in and get good advice.”

There are encouraging trends where communities of migrants, for instance, are joining UNISON, not because union organisers are actively looking to recruit people who are very hard to reach, in work like home care. Instead, they have been talking to each other in church. In Lanarkshire, networks of Nigerian people have passed the message on. Some of the work of linking into those communities is geographically-based, but if people don’t identify as much with their local geographic community, there are networks, activists, and allies, in churches or other communities. For Karren, there are seeds of hope in the struggles of the last year.

“People who are protesting feel that like they’re in a community. But linked to trade unions and the community, we’ve got faith groups, we’ve got people who support asylum seekers, we’ve got charities, we’ve got Women’s Aid, we’ve got food banks. It might not be trade union activism, but it’s activism. We’ve all come together standing in front of a hotel, and we’ve then all connected in lots of different ways. None of this can be top down. It also needs to be online, because the digital community has a massive impact and we don’t know how to handle it.”

“It needs to be in schools and education, it needs to be support, training, engaging with migrant workers, with church groups, and everything. So these are all the different things we are trying to do. No one thing is going to work. And what I want from unions is to be supported to do that, and to support other TUIC branches elsewhere. It is a lot of work, from digital learning, supporting activists, to finding out what unions are already present in different communities.”

“It’s not one answer, but it has to be grassroots activism. It can’t be academic. It has to be: how do you build support, and how do you get that support on a national level, or share that learning on a national level? What works, what doesn’t work? Have you tried this? We need to be listening to the people doing it on the front line.”

One thing Karren and Charlie agreed on was that moving forward, the trade unions should be able to better mobilise. “If a branch of any union is saying, well, we’ve got attacks coming – can we have help on Tuesday?” then the central union needs to be ready with resources.

“I remember”, said Karren, “the very first or second protest, and somebody saying, where are all the trade unions? And somebody was saying to me, oh, well, this particular union doesn’t like Stand Up To Racism and this other union doesn’t like this other group. And I was really frustrated. I said, do you think they folk on the other side of the road all get on with each other? There is some historical context to unions being in competition, saying “I’m not doing it because they’re doing it”. And I think we need to get past that if we’re going to get all these groups together. When you look at who the activists are who attend anti-far right marches, it is left activist, but not always trade union activists. We need to think through how to get to a point where Scotland’s trade union activists are ready to say, “this is part of what we do”.”

The first part of this interview was published in issue 150.

THE EQUAL RIGHT TO BE SEASICK

Dylan Brewerton-Harper talks to **Janice McGarry** about joining Glasgow's shipyards, her trail-blazing career, and her battle with — and victory over — a sexist and harassing boss.

Following the historic Upper-Clyde Shipbuilders (UCS) work-in in 1971 and 1972, Govan Shipbuilders was formed, and in 1977 it was nationalised by the Labour government and subsumed into the newly-created conglomerate, British Shipbuilders. Hugh Murphy, in his 2020 history of the conglomerate, points out that this represented “one of the last of the major industrial nationalisations”. By 1984, under a new Thatcher government emboldened by a landslide election victory the year before, it represented “one of the first privatisations” and catalysed an “almost complete industrial collapse in merchant shipbuilding”.

In the summer of 1978, an 18-year-old Janice McGarry from Ruchazie in the East End of Glasgow had just finished her Highers and left school. She had secured a place to study engineering at the University of Strathclyde, and over a long summer waiting to begin her course she decided to look for a job. Through a mix of personal determination and timely coincidences, she made history by becoming the first woman to be given an apprenticeship in a British shipyard.

DBH: How did you get into the world of shipbuilding? What do you think led you to that point?

JC: It was absolutely a series of coincidences. The only shipyard connection in the family was one of my uncles who was a foreman before he became a manager in Yarrow's shipbuilding, but he certainly wouldn't have prompted me to go into the industry. I subsequently found out at my aunt's funeral that she was one of the many women who went into the shipyards during the war and became an electrician.

I didn't know what I wanted to do at school. Most of my pals were applying to join the bank, which didn't really appeal to me. My mother was desperate for me to become a nurse, not a doctor, strangely enough. It was one of the teachers that suggested, since I was good at maths and physics, that I should think about engineering. I'd never heard of engineering up until that stage. My brother, he'd got a job as a draughtsman. And it seemed like quite a good job. So I did techy drawing at school. When the headmaster was asked if I could do technical drawing, he said:

“We don't have enough teachers to teach the boys. We're certainly not going to start teaching the girls.”

But one of the teachers offered to teach me at lunchtime. So I used to go across to the classroom, and I did the year's course and got an O level in technical drawing.

I applied for university and got a space on an engineering course at Strathclyde University. And then during that summer I was just wandering about, waiting for university to start. And

I was getting a bit worried about being a poor student because I would get a minimum grant. I wandered past the careers guidance place one day and I went in and explained to them what I was doing, and that I was having second thoughts about going to university.

And they said, “Well, you're probably looking for an apprenticeship. You're too late to apply, but there are two here that are left.”

One was Govan Shipbuilders who were recruiting late that year because their training centre had burnt down and they had had to focus on that. So that was a big coincidence. And then the other one was to be a civil engineering consultant. I went for both interviews.

After much discussion, Govan Shipbuilders had to get approval from British Shipbuilders in Newcastle to actually offer me an apprenticeship, because it was the first time in any British shipyard that they'd offered an apprenticeship to a female. So in August of '78, I started a four-year apprenticeship.

I was a mechanical technician apprentice destined for the engine drawing office. We did six months in the training centre drawing office, which was at Linthouse. And then we had to do six months in the craft training centre, which was working with the fitters, learning how to scrape a steam flange, how to do turning, how to do drilling, how to do filing — all those craft things that we had to know about. They did give us a shot at welding and things like that, but that was for the black squad. We were more refined than that.

The rest of the apprenticeship was basically eighteen months going around different sections in the yard on the tools working with the guys, and then eighteen months in the engine drawing office.

In 1975, Harold Wilson's Labour government passed the Sex Discrimination Act — a groundbreaking piece of legislation that rendered unlawful “certain kinds of sex discrimination and discrimination on the ground of marriage”. It also established the Equal Opportunities Commission to “work toward the elimination of discrimination” and “promote quality of opportunity”. In 1979, only one year into her apprenticeship at Govan Shipbuilders, Janice found herself in need of the newly-formed Commission.

All the other apprentices had been on sea trials. Now it was my turn. Mr. Shilp was the chief draughtsman in the engine drawing office. And in those days, chief draughtsmen were next to God. You didn't speak to them unless they spoke to you first. It was really very hierarchical. It's embedded in my brain that I went into his office and said:

“Afternoon, Mr. Shilp. Thank you very much for seeing me. I just wanted to chat with you and let you know that I'd be

keen on going on sea trials and there's sea trials coming up. I was hoping you would consider me for the recording party."

His response: "Get out of my office. How dare you come in here and ask for such things? If I had my way, we would never have employed you at all. This is no place for a woman. Get out." It came as a bit of a surprise to me.

DBH: What was your response?

JC: I was really quite shocked because, well, I'd been apprentice of the year. And in my naive headspace, if you work hard and if you're good at something, that will be recognised and therefore you will get some sort of promotion or recompense on the basis of your ability to do the job. You learn that that might not always be the case. But at that time, I was really quite shocked.

So I went back to the office. The other guys were there waiting to see what he said because I think they knew what the response might be. They came out with: "Yeah, we need to do something about this." So of course we were unionised. I was seething mad. The more that guy came into my face and said, "You will not", the more I dug in and said, "I will."

And that kind of shaped our relationship for the next year. He used to come up to my desk and just shout at me and walk away. He would just get so frustrated by the fact that I didn't fold over and say, "That's okay."

My union, God bless them, were always one for doing a pragmatic deal. And this guy had incensed me so much that there was going to be no bloody pragmatic deal. I was going on sea trials.

So the next day I phoned the Equal Opportunities Commission. I couldn't phone from the office, so I had to walk along Govan Road at lunchtime, and look them up in one of the phone books that was in the phone box. And I phoned them, made an appointment and they met me in a café on Govan Road the next day. I explained the situation and the guy said they were happy to take my case on.

So I went back to the office that afternoon and told the shop steward what I'd done. He was quite upset with me, but he got over it. And yeah, I took on a kind of cause that I was not going to be pushed around just because I happened to be female. Certainly not by an old bigot like that. We took the case to an employment tribunal. It wasn't a year, but it took a lot of months to get there. And meanwhile this man made my life hell.

To put it like an engineer, I must have had a rod of steel up my back to go into the shipyards in the first place. But as far as I was concerned, it was a means to an end because this was a good apprenticeship and then I could get sponsorship and go to university. I'd always wanted to go to university, engineering students could get sponsorship, and through the scholarship scheme in Govan, they would send two people a year. Out of 36,000 workers they sent two people a year and I decided I was going for that.

You had to serve your four-year apprenticeship before you could apply for that scheme. So I had to get through my apprenticeship first. But the more that man came after me, the more I just hardened up to him. I was not letting him push me about like that. I knew I had a solid case, but there was a clause in the Equal Opportunities Act that said that it didn't apply on board ships. Immediately the company said: "Oh no, because ships have limited accommodation." But my argument was that as the recording party on board ship, none of us got accommodation. We had all come off the ship at night. So we were on early in the morning, the ship would stop in the measured mile, and then they would take all the recording party off. There was no

need of accommodation for the recording party. Therefore that clause did not apply.

DBH: So you were good at your role, and you've gone on to university and then had the career that you subsequently had. You had as much right to do that basic part of the apprenticeship as anyone else.

JC: That was exactly my argument. I was not asking for any more than my colleagues in the same training scheme. So, the day before we were due to go to the tribunal, a deal was done between the union and company. And Mr. Shilp informed me of it by appearing at my desk saying:

"Clear your desk. Get out of here. You report to Jimmy in the engine design office tomorrow — or Monday."

He kind of stamped his feet and off he went. And the guys from the union told me that a deal had been done, and they were hoping I would accept it because I was to go into the next sea trial and I'd be part of the recording party. But in the meantime I was being moved away from that office, away from that man, and I was being moved into the engine design office.

I took that as a good deal because, one, it got me away from that old git, and two, you could only apply for the engine design office two years after your apprenticeship. They were the designers; we were the draughtsmen. So that was a promotion as far as I was concerned.

And I went on the sea trial. Just the one. And I was seasick. I wouldn't tell anybody because I was too frightened.

DBH: You fought for the equal right to be seasick. Just like all the men who would have been seasick.

JC: Yeah, exactly. It was pretty rough down those measured miles. And cargo ships don't have any stabilisers. So I just stayed in the engine room and hoped nobody could see what was going on. I talk about that to people now because it was so blatant. It wasn't hidden misogyny or anything. It was in your face. "You should never have been employed here.", "This is no place for a woman."

DBH: Which actually makes your case easier, in a sense.

JC: An absolute slam dunk. Personnel, I think, knew they didn't have a leg to stand on. They were going to lose this case. So he was coming under pressure from the company to change his mind. But that was beyond him. And I think every time they had a meeting, he'd come out and shout at me instead. He'd come up beside me at my desk shouting: "I've had enough. I've had enough of you and your behaviour. I'm going to phone your parents." To which I replied: "You do that. Because if you think I'm bad, wait till you get to my mum."

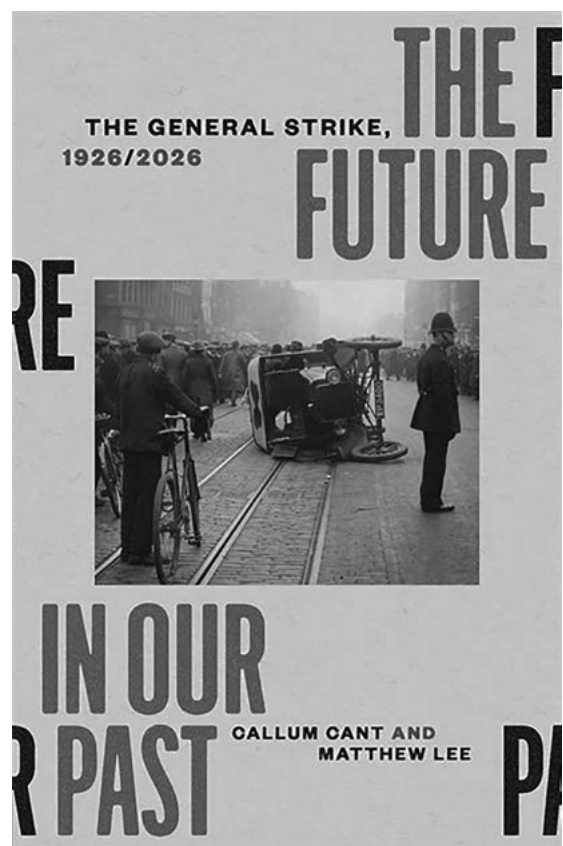
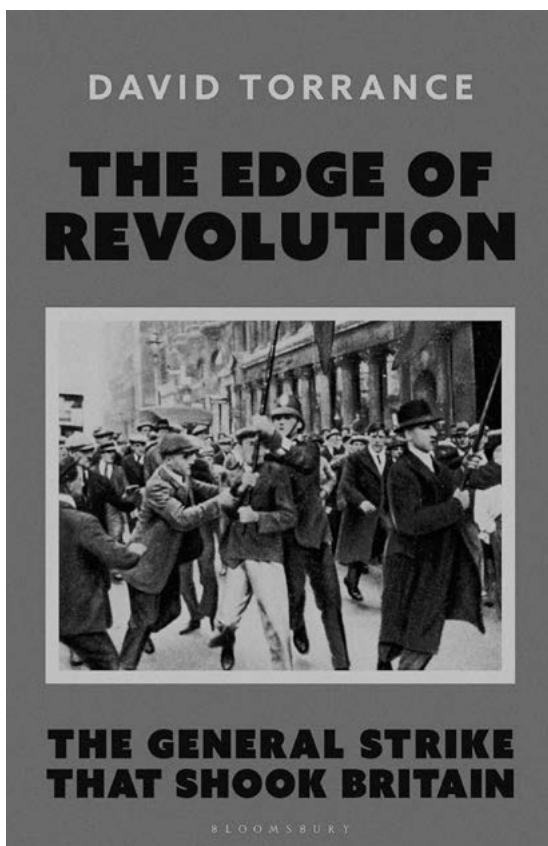
WHAT DID WE WIN IN THE GENERAL STRIKE?

100 years since the General Strike, **Amber Ward** reviews books by David Torrance, *The Edge of Revolution* (Bloomsbury, 2026) and Callum Cant and Matthew Lee, *The Future in Our Past: The General Strike, 1926/2026* (Verso, 2026).

What did you do in the General Strike? Stanley Baldwin went to the zoo. It was day six, workers across Britain were still out, and the Conservative Prime Minister just needed a break. His friend and cabinet member William Bridgeman took him there to ‘distract his mind’, and the change of scene seemed to do the trick. On the drive home the Prime Minister seemed lighter and pulled out a letter, written to him personally from the Prince of Wales. The Prince had tuned in to the Prime Minister’s emergency broadcast the night before and had some ‘almost affectionate’ words about his delivery. Quietly, the premier beamed.

On its centenary, two books tell the story of the UK General Strike in meticulous detail through the eyes of people who were there. In May 1926, workers in key sectors across the four nations

went on strike for nine consecutive days. Public transport ceased, mines emptied, and printers stopped printing the news. Docks stood still and there was a growing risk of food shortages. In *The Future in Our Past*, Callum Cant and Matthew Lee narrate the experiences of workers and organisers in South Wales, East London, and Swindon – in 1926 and 2026. In *The Edge of Revolution*, David Torrance gives an account from the perspectives of those who, he writes, have been ‘much maligned’ in this story: the politicians, coal owners, commentators, and ‘volunteers’ who kept things running. The two books narrate the strike from very different perspectives. Yet their shared attention to subjectivities – the weird ways in which people experienced things and wrote about them – make for two insightful accounts each in their own way.



The General Strike grew out of disputes in the coal industry. At the turn of the twentieth century Britain's coal sector boomed. Huge numbers employed in textiles and traditional industries like weaving and fishing were all pulled to the mines for work. At this time, one in eleven working-age men worked in coal, and the sector employed large numbers of women and children too. Coal powered the nation's homes, its industry, and its social infrastructure, but a good amount of the stuff we exported abroad. So when trade took a dip, Britain's coal industry was hit especially hard. Both plummeted during the First World War. In 1915 the government part-nationalised the mines as an emergency measure, establishing a national wage.

In April 1921 the mines were returned to private hands, although there was less demand for British coal now that other nations had adapted to do without. But the coal owners still wanted their cut; they immediately threatened miners with significant wage reductions. The strong Miners Federation of Great Britain (MFGB), a national union, refused to accept the new terms. They called upon their partners in the Triple Industrial Alliance – the National Union of Railwaymen (NUR) and the National Transport Workers' Federation (NTWF) – to walk out with the miners, but the two allies backed out on the day. The date of that 'betrayal', 15th April 1921, became known as 'Black Friday'. Coal owners kept miners locked out their pits for three more months until they were forced to accept local wage cuts.

Black Friday was a sharp lesson in the need for communication and strategy across sections of Britain's labour movement. But that movement held many visions of the future and radically different ideas on how to get there. After Black Friday, the General Council of the Trades Union Congress (TUC), the unions' umbrella organisation in England and Wales, took on more of a coordinating role between the major unions. In Scotland there was the STUC, an independent body that worked closely with the TUC. The TUC General Council had thirty-two members, all union officials who ranged from communists to members of the new Labour Party. Meanwhile, more radical pressure groups were forming amongst the ordinary rank-and-file. These included the National Minority Movement (NMM) within the unions, and the National Unemployed Workers' Movement (NUWM) outside them. Both were led by members of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) and were affiliated with the Third Communist International: the international body for revolutionary socialism led from Moscow. The Independent Labour Party (ILP), a broad-church socialist organisation, was especially strong in Scotland. In the mid-1920s it advocated a parliamentary route to deep social transformation.

In the year leading up to the General Strike the economy worsened. In April 1925 the new Conservative chancellor of the exchequer, Winston Churchill, returned Britain to the gold standard that it had left during the First World War. This pegged the pound to a

fixed amount of gold – the same amount as before the war – which overvalued the pound in relation to the dollar, the world's other major trading currency. British exports shot up in price on the global market. Coal bore the brunt again, so coal owners attempted to cut wages and increase hours further. The miners' response, under the leader of A. J. Cook, was steadfast: 'Not a penny off the pay, not a minute on the day'.

On 31st July 1925 miners won a government subsidy for their wages – this was 'Red Friday' – but only for nine months whilst there was an official investigation into how to stabilise the coal industry in the longer term. This task was assigned to the Liberal statesman Herbert Samuel who cut short his sojourn in Italy to work on it. In a letter to a friend, Samuel described the interruption as being 'sent down my coal mine'. All this time the Baldwin government sought to 'tighten up' its emergency machinery, preparing for a potential confrontation with the miners when the subsidy expired in the spring. Outside of government, the Organisation for the Maintenance of Supplies (OMS) was created in 1925 to recruit volunteers to replace strikers in the event of a general strike. It was a magnet for members of the British Fascists, but officially they had to renounce their membership to be allowed in. The TUC, on the other hand, did nothing to prepare.

In March 1926 the Samuel Commission was complete. It rejected nationalisation, suggested points for reorganising the coal industry, and insisted upon an immediate reduction to miners' wages. Negotiations ensued and miners refused to take a cut, so when the wage subsidy expired on May Day the coal owners locked them out. The General Council of the TUC prepared to call all its members out on strike in support of the miners, but it strove to avoid doing so as far as it could. In the end it was the Baldwin government that called off negotiations, triggering the TUC to call a general strike. Printers at the *Daily Mail* had walked out spontaneously in a small wildcat strike – they refused to print a sensationalist anti-union editorial – and the government jumped on it, calling off negotiations on the basis that 'press freedom' was under threat.

The King declared a state of emergency under the Emergency Powers Act 1920, the first time it was used for a sustained period of time. The Act empowered the government to make 'any regulations' necessary in order to secure 'the essentials of life to the community'. On 3rd May the TUC called all its members to strike in solidarity with the miners. Officials began arresting prominent members of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) in case things got out of hand. Britain's first and only general strike commenced the following day.

Across Britain, local union branches elected delegates to trades councils, small committees that were ready to act in the event of a strike – or a greater political event. Trades councils had been established in the years before the General Strike; during it they transformed into strike committees and Councils of Action. In the

village of Bedlinog in South Wales, the Council of Action coordinated a strong strike at Taff Merthyr colliery. Crucially the Council of Action also oversaw canteens and collectivised childcare, bringing domestic work out of individual homes and into the public sphere. Bedlinog was tightly organised but pretty quiet too, because police didn't even bother trying to break anything up.

Elsewhere, the government's emergency machinery lurched more visibly into action. Back in 1919, Lloyd George's government had divided Britain into a system of twelve 'divisions' that could be administered by 'Civil Commissioners' in an emergency. There were ten divisions in England and one each in Scotland and Northern Ireland. Civil Commissioners were junior government ministers, each with a headquarters and an unelected staff of eight. During the General Strike, they were instructed to exercise 'all powers of government' and, where appropriate, to 'act on initiative'. The Civil Commissioner for the South Midland Division, the 6th Earl Winter-ton, had a gloat about this in a letter to his friend, the new Viceroy of India. His 'ultimate powers', the Commissioner wrote, were 'as comprehensive as those of any head of a Province in India'. In another letter he described how he had transformed an assistant into 'a complete local Mussolini'. He even managed to visit his old school, Eton College, where he found the teachers and housemasters all out waiting for him, notebooks in hand, ready to receive his 'instructions and advice'.

Things escalated in East London, where there were large pickets at the area's important docklands. The military was deployed and eventually armoured cars arrived to escort food and essentials out from the ports. Across the docklands street battles broke out between strikers and police. Many of the latter were volunteer 'Special Constables' supplied by the Organisation for the Maintenance of Supplies (OMS) that was now working in close partnership with the Baldwin government. Navy submarines arrived to supply power to the docks and cold storage warehouses. Navy warships were stationed in the Thames. Each day, a local seventeen-year-old called Alfred Green would sneak onto the boats near the water's edge to steal cigarettes.

In Swindon large numbers were employed by Great Western Railway in their workshops; the town boasted the largest branch of the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU) in the Midlands region. When university student 'volunteers' arrived to try to drive the stationary trains, strikers applied grease to the tracks so the carriages could barely move. On 6th May the Commons debated whether the TUC calling everyone out in a 'general' strike was against the law. On 11th May at the High Court, Justice Astbury made the arbitrary judgement that it was.

On the evening of 12th May the TUC announced their 'unconditional surrender'. The General Council hoped the government would accept new recommendations from Herbert Samuel that included extending the miners' wage subsidy and protections for

strikers when they returned to work. These were not guarantees, and Samuel had only written them down in a memorandum, but the TUC called off the strike anyway. The nation was informed instantly over the wireless. When the news reached the young Jennie Lee, daughter of an ILP miner and the future Labour Minister for the Arts, she and others in the Edinburgh strike committee 'ended the day with a cursing competition'.

In Bedlinog, East London, and Swindon, strike committees and Councils of Action all rejected the TUC's decision. The Taff Merthyr picket lasted for six more months; dock workers in militarised East London stayed out for several more days. In Swindon, when news arrived that the TUC had called off the strike, chairman of the strike committee Harry Hustings declared: 'That is a lie!' The town's transport workers stayed out for an unofficial period. Miners everywhere continued their strike until November, when they were forced back on worse conditions than before.

The General Strike was a staggered, universal defeat. On this both books agree, but they offer differing interpretations of what the event actually was. For Torrance the General Strike was exactly that: an industrial dispute that ricocheted into a broad sympathy strike, skilfully manoeuvred by the moderates in all camps. This set the future tone for British industrial relations. Level-headedness: the real Utopia. In his acknowledgements, Torrance gives a nod to Great Man Theory, a philosophy that contends that 'major events are shaped by exceptional individuals'. The book even opens with a five-page 'Dramatis Personae', an annotated list of major characters.

For Cant and Lee the General Strike was a missed opportunity, a state of pre-revolution in which the vanguard lurched forward, only to be betrayed by labour-aristocratic bureaucrats in the TUC, whom the Communist International had, at that time, told British communists in the CPGB to listen to. 'There was a future in our past', they write, 'even if we don't live in it today'. Interesting discussions with workers, organisers, and locals in South Wales, East London, and Swindon in 2026 also feature. The authors connect 1926 and 2026 to consider how that future could be opened up again. In this drama, an inflexible Leninism provides the cast, set, and *dénouement*.

Two very different accounts of the General Strike, both told compellingly through personal testimonies and experiences. Great men, great Theory, and all the deep or daft ways in which a historic event was felt. Postmodern pages bound together by long-nineteenth-century spines.

A century on, the General Strike has left us whatever lesson we like. It was the revolution we swerved, the one we fluffed, and the one we kept writing about. It was a great defeat, but for the next hundred years we kept whittling away – all of us – at tools for re-thinking what truly constitutes revolutionary change. I'm being wide, but grant me this: did it really fail?

THE OLD RED THISTLE QUEST

A History of the Scottish Labour Party, by David Torrance (Edinburgh University Press, 2026) reminds us that Labour's woes in Scotland run deep through its history, finds **Finn Smyth**.

With the British Labour Party ejecting its first prime minister for a decade, installing Andy Burnham as the seventh in as many years, we have to wonder whether the stability and growth of Britain's twentieth century 'age of affluence' has permanently dissolved. Will the Labour Party, which first matured in confidence and character by the middle of the twentieth century, ever regain its sense of self and purpose? Labour's uncertainty today is all the more disconcerting because its symbols and language, despite New Labour's spin-makeover, still partly invoke a time when its politicians confidently claimed to represent the majority in Britain, and spoke of full employment, socialist planning and the mixed economy. Could nostalgia for Labour's past, when the welfare state was novel and young, be justified if it reminds us what used to be accomplished with political will and vast Westminster majorities?

Historians warn against nostalgia, of course. And the history of the Labour Party is at times too nostalgic, among its politicians, in the academy, and in the media. A rose-tinted BBC documentary from five years ago longingly recalled Blair's 1997 triumph and the long economic expansion presided over by New Labour before 2008. More broadly, historians regret the erosion of the postwar civic culture which fostered popular consent for Attlee's and Wilson's muscular control over the economy. We are reminded that the last time income tax was raised was in 1975, before the cultural and demographic transformation of Britain under Thatcher – termed the 'decline of the public' by David Marquand – made further contributions to the state politically unthinkable.

The real danger of nostalgia is overlooking how contingent and contested the past always was. Close examination of Labour's history reveals how uncertain its future often seemed, from its 19th century invention to its 21st century paralysis. Such a considered examination has recently been provided by David Torrance, in his new history of the Scottish Labour Party and its relationship with the wider British Party. Nowhere in Labour historiography is nostalgia more likely than Scotland. There, fond memories of Keir Hardie's original Labour Representation Committee, Red Clydeside, and Labour's electoral dominance from 1964 to 2010 have made the SNP's unprecedented fifth consecutive Holyrood victory all the more unbearable for some. But as Torrance documents, Labour struggled to ground itself in Scotland for years. Despite the Party's origins in Scotland, its momentum quickly steered to England and its politics to Westminster. The Independent Labour Party was far more vibrant and active than Labour branches in Scotland during the first decades of the twentieth century. It veered to Labour's left under James Maxton, until its disaffiliation in 1931.

Torrance's granular study tracks the intellectual confusion, internal divisions, and cash-starved organising which often defined Labour's trajectory in Scotland. This finds its best case study in the battle for home rule and its modern conception, devolution. Despite the progressive potential and rhetorical value of home rule for a leftwing party critical of Westminster's London myopia, Labour repeatedly foundered. We are pointed to Ramsay MacDonald's dithering on home rule during Labour's first government, and to Richard Crossman's polite, English contempt for the posturing of Willie Ross. After 1979, momentum for devolution grew as Scotland consistently rejected Thatcherism, returning the 'fighting fifty' to the Commons in 1987. But, again, Torrance points out the cracks. Neil Kinnock and Donald Dewar dampened Labour's potential appeal to Scottish nationalists, who were resentful of a Tory government with only ten MPs north of the border. Divided amongst themselves, Labour's leadership drew the line against Poll Tax non-payment despite widespread support in Scotland.

In the concluding chapters, Torrance reflects on the ironic undoing of the Labour Party in Scotland by the realisation of its own devolution policy. The great paradox of Scottish devolution has been to enhance nationalism's appeal, rather than to blunt its edge as some Labour thinkers hoped. Reflection demonstrates that Labour was never coherent about nationalism, in Scotland or Britain, and today is no exception. Devolution has reoriented the SNP around Holyrood, at Labour's expense, who have been left to repeat arguments about the union's relevance for Scotland. While Labour has regained power in Westminster, it has proven unable to maintain legitimacy in both parliaments since its ousting in 2007. This is perhaps a fitting contradiction when the tumultuous history of Scottish Labour is considered in the round.

The first dedicated single volume history of the Labour Party in Scotland since Ian Donnachie, Christopher Harvie and Ian Hood published *Forward! Labour Politics in Scotland* in 1989, Torrance's chronicle traces the Party's evolution in response to the major events of the twentieth century, from the Great Wars and the 1930s slump to the Suez crisis and the IMF bailout, and beyond. Its ambition is also its limitation. With so much to work through in 270 pages, Torrance gives himself little space to reflect in depth on key episodes in the Party's history. As a result, major debates are briefly mentioned and many questions left open.

One missing question, for example, regards the role Labour played in Scotland and Britain in destroying the Liberals. How far did the Liberals' collapse because of internal divisions, or Labour's own drive and appeal, despite the Party's uncertain and clumsy be



ginnings? Another underexplored area is the role of socialist ideas in defining Labour's shape and eventual fortunes in Scotland. Torrance argues that while the Party was distinguished by the large number of intellectual traditions vying for influence among its leaders and organisers, it never committed itself to a dominant school of thought beyond persistent dedication to parliamentary politics and the rejection of revolutionary doctrine. More work needs to be done to understand the genealogies of leftwing thought in Scotland in the twentieth century, tracing the interactions between ethical and Christian socialism, for example, or connections between Fabianism and Keynesianism.

While Torrance provides a brilliant exposition of the disagreements and interactions between the Labour Party in Scotland and the central Party in England, another overlooked theme worth investigating is the relationship between Scottish Labour and the European left. Donald Dewar's and Tam Dalyell's staunch Europeanism would suggest there was nothing parochial about the Labour Party, at least in the late twentieth century. What's more, the Scottish left occupied a uniquely early, though understudied, vantage point within the European New Left. As Neil Davidson showed, Gramsci was brought to the British left in the middle of the twentieth century through the explorations of Hamish Henderson and Tom Nairn. These excavations seem particularly relevant for Scotland today, where for several years the SNP has looked optimistically towards the EU as a vehicle for its own nationalist project.

The inertia of modern Labour – and its demise in Scotland – is not historically unprecedented. As Torrance shows, the Party always pulled in different directions, its greatest achievements far more insecure at their inception than we might like to recall. Given its resounding collapse, only time can tell if it will even be possible to write a second volume of Labour's history in Scotland. In 1983 the French political scientist Jacques Leruez memorably called Scotland 'a nation without a state'. Thanks to Labour, the Scottish nation which produced the Party, now has elements of its own state. But by creating the modern Scottish political arena, the Party engineered its own exit. It is far from clear, then, if Labour will ever seem relevant or play a major political role in Scotland again.

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FREEDOM AND GUILT IN IRELAND AND SCOTLAND

Union Theatre Company delivers thought-provoking debut in their production of *Shall Roger Casement Hang?* at the Hill Street Theatre, Edinburgh, finds **Allie Kerper**.

The brand-new Union Theatre Company could not have picked a more appropriate time to revive Richard Arnott's 2016 play *Shall Roger Casement Hang?* Originally written for the centenary of the Easter Rising and in the wake of Scotland's 2014 Independence Referendum, the decision to stage the play in the week leading up to Edinburgh Pride was presumably deliberate. However, the preceding week's Belfast pogroms and sentencing of four Palestine Action activists as terrorists were as much a part of the play's ominous backdrop as the noose that loomed over the set for the play's duration.

Shall Roger Casement Hang? dramatizes a critical moment in the life of a controversial and contradictory figure: an anti-imperialist hero of the British Empire, and a Protestant-raised Irish Nationalist who both aided and tried to cancel the Rising. Roger Casement was renowned in his day for exposing Belgium's human rights atrocities in the Congo. He later became involved in the Irish Nationalist cause and, in 1916, was arrested trying to smuggle German guns to the Irish Volunteers. Casement was convicted of treason and executed. During the trial, Casement's diaries detailing his sexual encounters with men were discovered and widely publicised, turning public opinion against him.

From the vast and complex story of Casement's life, Arnott's play depicts just two days: being questioned by the police the day before and on the day of the Rising. In the first act, Casement (played by Paul Arendt) is questioned by the fictional Scottish Captain Reginald Hall (Adrian Moore). The dialogue loops and repeats, which slows the action but emphasises the dynamic: while Hall tries to offer Casement a way out of trouble, Casement, nervous and unwell, doubles down on his convictions without wanting to jeopardise his comrades, unsure of what Hall already knows. The interrogation is intercut with flashbacks to Casement's arrest and attempt to send word to the Volunteers through a priest. In these scenes, Moore plays both the arresting officer and the priest, conveying the sense that the different faces of authority ultimately share the same interests.

If anyone in the audience had forgotten the noose at the back of the set during Act I, a projection between acts reminds them what is really at stake. Images of people, ranging from Congolese victims of nineteenth century empire to modern Trans Pride marchers, are projected onto the back wall of the stage. The noose occasionally frames the face of an individual. The effect creates a foreboding mood into which Act II roars with fury: the Rising has begun, the diaries have been discovered, and there is no more mercy for Roger Casement. With nowhere left to hide, Casement proudly defends what he stands for, in all its imperfection and moral compromise.

One of the play's most striking moments is when Casement infers that Hall too is queer. Rather than simply a twist in which the homophobe is secretly gay, we see something more: an invitation of mentorship and solidarity, mirroring the way in which Casement

wishes for Ireland's independence movement to inspire the people of Scotland. Of course, Hall cannot accept Casement's truth/challenge/vision, and the question in the play's title is answered as it was in history.

The play asks many questions, explicit and otherwise. When Casement asks Hall, 'What does freedom mean to you?', we also wonder, what do guilt and innocence mean, and to whom are they afforded? In Hall's Scottishness and loyalty to imperial sensibilities, we also wonder, what would an independent Scotland stand for? The answers to these questions are troubled by the text, the production, and the political context of the performance.

Just days before the play's opening night, the first of the Filton 25 defendants were sentenced as terrorists, without the jury having been informed prior to conviction. What do innocence and guilt mean, and to whom are they afforded? On the play's closing night, a man targeted Muslims in a series of violent attacks across Edinburgh. What does freedom mean to you, and what would an independent Scotland stand for?

Arnott's play feels eerily prescient, as does the Union Theatre Company's choice to stage it for their debut production. Per their website, the company aims to produce 'challenging, engaging and thoughtful theatre', and they are off to a phenomenal start with *Shall Roger Casement Hang?* The production ran just five nights, with the first including a Q&A with Arnott after the show. Arnott discussed the context in which he wrote the play, details about Casement's life, how his own fascination with Casement came about, and the reasons and inspirations behind certain writing choices.

Arnott spoke of 'recovering the present tense in history' – how the characters in the play don't know what will happen, even though the playwright and audience do. Casement may have known that (most of) Ireland would one day be independent, but he could not have known that (according to Arnott) the reinterment of his bones in Dublin would one day be thought to have incited the Troubles, or that the long shadow of this period would include (allegedly, at time of writing) Loyalist paramilitaries committing anti-Muslim pogroms in Belfast more a century after the Rising. Nor could Casement have known about the mass struggles for – and partial successes toward – queer liberation that would give rise to things like Pride Month and the celebration of historical queer figures.

At a time when history feels alarmingly present, radical theatre can remind us what questions we should be asking ourselves, and not to settle for the pretence of neat answers. The Union Theatre Company opened their run to a nearly sold-out venue; hopefully, this thoughtful, troubling, human production has garnered them the support they need to carry on asking such questions. They promise to be an important addition to Edinburgh's year-round performing arts ecosystem, and local theatre fans should keep an eye out for their next production.



Shall Roger Casement Hang? June 2026 Photo by Robin Mair Photography



Shall Roger Casement Hang? 2026 Photo by Rob Shields

WHAT IS GOING WRONG WITH EDUCATION?

More school democracy and student agency must be part of the solution, write **Brian Boyd** and **Henry Maitles**.

All sectors of education seem to be lurching from crisis to crisis. Schools are unruly with mobile phone-led bullying and reports of increased, sometimes violent, misbehaviour. Teachers are at their wits' end with reduced classroom support amid a spike in student needs and unemployed teachers. And, in FE and particularly HE, financial crises are spiralling towards university subject closures and redundancies. Focusing on one part of this troubled landscape, this article will cover aspects of theory and practice in schools, in particular relating to active learning and childrens' rights.

The much-maligned Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) promoted the embrace of 'active learning'. The logic was that active learning led to deeper learning. Other successful countries adopted it, in Scandinavia in particular. CfE was also designed to create a way in which all learners were able to learn together and from each other. CfE tried to develop the idea that all learners can use deep, active learning to enable them to better their skills and understanding. These ideas were not plucked from the air, but were based on long-researched practices of learning through play or doing. The research suggested that this kind of 'discovery-type learning', which could also involve outdoor learning, encouraged students to better understand their learning than our more traditional rote-based learning. The principle that no child should be regarded as unable to learn was supposed to enable all children to learn irrespective of their upbringing. When pupils arrive in school, they should not be regarded as unable to learn but rather helped by the learning process and other pupils to reach their full potential.

Whatever the theory, there were practical problems. Let us highlight three. Firstly, when children in early years and primary education move on to secondary then everything changes. Those same pupils face a system where success is measured by exam results. In this phase of education, it has proved difficult to create space for deeper learning, and to maintain a breadth of disciplinary learning, primarily because our exams (particularly the Highers) encourage shallow, rote, repetition learning. The focus becomes all about ensuring that the 'best pupils' are in the 'top sets', and

so achieve good results. The principles embedded in early stages are therefore abandoned. Exams also impact on creativity and citizenship which are in fact only valued if they are seen to improve exam results. When we create 'bottom sets' it is not surprising that those pupils see themselves as less valuable and often they feel it's not even worth the effort to try. There is no parity of esteem at present between those pupils offered a diet of 'vocational' subjects as opposed to those following an 'academic' pathway. This is the crux of the matter. Until secondary schools, and indeed government, truly address this issue, the gap will never be closed. There is no suggestion that secondary teachers are not working hard to help their pupils. It is not their fault. As a teacher, you try to ensure that every child does well. The issue is that if you are judged by the exam results of your class, then you find that this dominates your teaching approach.

Secondly, and relatedly, politicians and others seem to believe that 'Closing the Gap' is about ensuring better exam results for pupils from more disadvantaged backgrounds. The current curriculum has a hierarchy where 'academic' subjects are seen as offering a route to university while 'practical' subjects are seen as mostly a route to the workplace or Further Education courses. But all research suggests a close correlation between results and parental income. We can't close the gap until we address the issue of poverty. And this is often what is ignored. Schools are told to get on with it.

A third issue is the shrinkage of support staff, in direct inversion to the growing support needs of the young people in schools. Gone are the days of specialist ASN teachers in classrooms across the curriculum. Behavioural support teachers in the classroom have been dispensed with. Indeed, in one school we recently visited, ASN staffing was cut from 3FTE to 0.8. Team teaching? Forget it. In today's classroom, the teacher is supposed to fulfil all these support roles alongside teaching. Many cope very well, but equally many know that in this era of cuts, it is better to have 'sets'. It makes teaching manageable – worse, but manageable.

Voice Without Agency

The citizenship agenda should in theory help overall student wellbeing. The central thrust of education for citizenship would ask challenging questions of our rote-learning-centred education system. Article 12 of the UN Convention on The Rights of the Child states that young people should be consulted on issues that affect them, and highlights that children are citizens too, and should be consulted in schools, including in primary (elementary) education. This again was following the experiences in Nordic countries (Sweden, Iceland, Finland, Norway, Denmark) consistently at the top of indices examining 'enabling environments'. Of course, any system of school democracy can be manipulated, but nonetheless they can contain markers of voice and agency. Most educators agreed about schools' responsibility to teach about democracy and prepare students to be effective democratic citizens. Moreover, the whole issue of inequalities in society and their impact on the educational attainment and aspiration of school students should be taken into account in terms of rights. Some argue that to believe that these kinds of issues can be addressed in the current school system is to misunderstand the nature of education and make teachers responsible for the ills of society. In any case, the issue of democracy in the classroom is rarely raised, never mind implemented, in the school setting. Headteachers no longer see it as a priority, as the mantras of exam results and testing take on greater significance for them.

In practice, Scottish schools are supposed to have meaningful pupil councils: forums for discussion, consultation, and decision-making involving pupils. Yet the record of school councils is not particularly promising. There were hopes that they would enable pupils to gain an enhanced understanding of the principles of democracy and their roles as active citizens. However, there is often little opportunity for disadvantaged and marginalised students to participate, and thus many voices go unheard, are sidelined or ignored. Many students view pupil councils as ineffective and tokenistic. Students do not value pupil councils because the school appears not to value them. Students raise concerns about issues that teachers predetermine. That student voice is not communicated to those who have ultimate influence over decision-making, and consequently nothing ever changes. In sum, the key critique is that the councils give the pupils voice but not agency.

Towards School Democracy

There are some positive examples. A high school in England in 2026 decided to ditch shirts, ties and blazers and replace them with polo shirts and outdoor coats or jackets. The Headteacher justified the change in terms of the desires of the students as outlined in consultation, what she called 'big student ask' (BBC, 2026). Yet there is also a more negative and widespread tendency connected with the question of whether schools should ban mobile phones. The Guardian reported on 24 April, that more than 90% of schools in England ban mobile phone use. According to a headline in The Independent on 25 April, 'A phone ban offers "potential benefits" for school performance and attainment, as well as children's wellbeing'. And the Aberdeen Press and Journal announced on 13 May: 'Phones to be banned in Moray schools after teacher reveals 'unacceptable' filming in classrooms'.

This is not the place to explore the rights and wrongs of this issue. There are good arguments on both sides about banning phones. Our point here is that we could not find an occasion in the 30 schools we contacted where this had been raised and consulted at a pupil council meeting. At a basic learning level, what a huge missed opportunity this is for democratic discussion, and for saying to the students, "your voice matters". But pupil councils are so far down the agenda that it does not occur to the decision-makers, even in those schools which are UNICEF 'Rights Respecting', to find out what the students think. Do they support the ban? We think they might. Do they have any ideas to deal with phones being used in antisocial manner? Who knows, since they weren't consulted. We guess that if this had been an issue twenty years ago, there would have been consultation. Instead of this democratic process, students who do support the ban are trundled out to give half-hearted justifications. Scotland has incorporated into law these rights in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Incorporation) (Scotland) Act 2024, which gives students the right to contest infringements in court. By failing to facilitate discussion with the students, have we infringed their human rights?

Stifling discussion and participation is not only counterproductive in terms of democracy. Some research has linked participation and attainment. To take one example: a 2015 study by the Children and Young People's Commissioner for Scotland found that seven secondary schools in areas of multiple deprivation had higher than expected levels of attainment. Further investigation established that in these seven schools, across all areas of school life, pupils had substantial opportunities formally and informally to take part in a variety of meaningful activities, to take responsibility for events, make contributions to school life and have their views considered in matters that affected them. This participative ethos was closely bound up for learners with "creating a sense of belonging at school, and bringing a rights-based dimension to educational experience." It would appear that where schools invest in creating opportunities for true participation, dividends can include increased motivation to learn, and improved attainment for learners. Even if this overstates the case – there were only 7 schools in the study – there are clearly some potential advantages to this approach. There is much work to be done to deepen the theory and advance the achievement of rights, equality, and democracy in our schools.

CONVENTION ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

Article 12

Governments "shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child."

For every child
Health, Education, Equality, Protection
ADVANCE HUMANITY

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DOUBLE RAINBOWS ABOVE THE COURT

A short story by **Ngan Nguyen.**

The rain patters steadily against the window. His mind travels back to the day when the storm poured water on the village for two consecutive days. He and his father squeezed themselves onto the bed. Later his father glared at the immense grey water, the boy sailed a bamboo boat with a purple paper sail.

‘Don’t lean forward. You can drown.’

His father held him back then stretched his long arm to retrieve the boat. The boy had a surge of strange warmth.

‘Do you still hear me?’ The Vietnamese interpreter interrupted his comforting memory. Her Vietnamese accent has not yet been influenced by Scots. ‘Bạn ơi, why did you leave school at fourteen?’ She continues with ‘Hey, friend.’ Her gentle voice brings him to tears; nobody has called him ‘bạn ơi’ since he left Vietnam.

He rummages through his memory. That afternoon his mother picked wild vegetables. Seeing a hole by the bank she thought of crab soup. She put her hand in the hole, a sharp pain made her withdraw it and fall back in the mud. Without knowing which snake she carried on picking vegetables. Later his father found her in the hammock with a purple, swollen arm. She died on the way to the hospital; just thirty when she left her six-year-old child. His father started drinking and gambling. The boy hated rainy days when the men came to his house. He had to go to the market to buy alcohol and cook pig’s guts. He was scared of his father’s beating if he refused and ashamed of buying things with debt. After preparing food, he went to the garden to play with crickets. The noise from the men laughing and screaming as someone lost made him wish he could grow up promptly and leave this house. Many times he walked to the highway. He glared at the traffic; swiftly passing cars, lorries, coaches and motorbikes. The noise made his heart beat faster. He quickly ran home.

One day, after school, he joined a group of boys playing football on the abandoned field. Not until sunset spread its pale orange silk on the sky did they hurry home. He noticed two red Hondas parked by the gate. He stopped dead after hearing a strange noise. He hid behind tall hibiscus and watched a man dragging his father from the house. While his father begged that stranger kept kicking him. A mix of hate and fear overwhelmed the boy.

‘Tôi cần rơm cần cỏ lạy anh.’

His father was begging, wishing that he could bite straw and grass, and pray to the man for time to pay his gambling debt. A tiger tattoo decorated the stranger’s right arm. The stub of cigarette clenched between his lips made a sound like a tough wind.

‘Who would believe a gambler and alcoholic like you?’ The man then kicked his father’s back making him fall flat on his face.

Two men carried the bed frame on its side to get through the door. The boy withdrew further into the hibiscus like a snail into its shell, holding his breath and watching. He waited till his father went inside. Darkness slowly embraced his house like a tomb.

‘What the hell did you do today coming home at this time?’

His father jumps at him and slashes his son with his belt. The boy covers his head with his hands, crying in pain, ‘Dad, don’t hit me.’ His father lurked by the dimly lit door. The boy stopped crying and hid in a corner. His father walked around like a blind animal, slashing his belt in the air.

‘Damn! Where are you?’

The boy crawled on his hands and knees across the floor, then quick as lightning dashed through the door towards the path, kicking the neighbour’s dog as it kept barking.

That night he slept in the hole in the banyan tree at the edge of the village. This hidden den let him crawl into a ball and avoid the wind. He woke to the noise of chatting farmers, and buffaloes going to the fields. The sun half appeared above the hill, spreading its bright halo. When he entered the house, his father lay on the mattress like a beggar in rags. The boy shivered imagining his similar future.

Nothing was edible in the kitchen. The scratching noise from his stomach urged him to thrust clumsy hands into the soil searching for sweet potatoes. With trembling fingers he found one, wiping off the soil first with his hands then with his t-shirt. After a first bite, a mixture of gentle sweetness and bitterness lingered on his tongue. He was glad to find more, hurriedly washing then boiling them. After a quick shower he went to his friend’s house.

'As I was running an errand for my Dad, I went to your house to return the bike. Your father told me that I must stop hanging out with you as you were leaving school to work. What will you do?'

He bit his tongue for a second. 'Maybe he can get a job for me.' Once home, he saw his father sitting on the step peeling sweet potatoes. 'Where's my bicycle, Dad?'

'I sold it.'

'Where's it now?' The boy was surprised at his own angry voice.

'Don't talk to me like that! I sold it to my friend.'

'Whoever bought my bike isn't your friend. Do you think all those drinkers and gamblers are your friends?'

'Shut up and leave me alone.'

About to explode and with bitter tears rolling down his cheeks, the boy glared at his dad.

Working as a brick carrier, forty five days straight, to build a four-storey house almost broke his back. On his second resting day, he is woken by the noise of heavy boots. Slowly opening his eyes, he wipes away the crust, taking a moment to realise that the men who took his bed are standing in the middle of his house.

'Get up, you bastards! You owe my boss too much money. You guys must work for us to pay your debt.'

He could grab only clothes and toiletries to put in a small rucksack.

'Where are you taking us?' He tried to hide his fear.

'Shut up!' The man removed a knife from the leather sheath on his calf and placed it on the boy's cheek. The strange coldness made the boy shiver and the man burst out laughing, 'He's going to pee himself.'

His father sat quietly beside him in the van. With the door closed, darkness like a shroud made him think of a coffin and chilled him to the bone.

'Where are they taking us Dad?'

'No idea.'

'What will happen if they plan to sell our organs?'

He shivered and tried to close his eyes but could not sleep. His father was quiet as a mouse. It was a long journey. They were in the middle of nowhere surrounded by forests. They used a tarpaulin to build a shelter, mosquitoes attacked him and the forest was cold. He curled into a ball close to his father to get warm. The men prepared tinned food which barely eased their hunger. After two days, strangers put him in a navy blue car, his father in a green one. His father avoided his son's look.

'You had to work in a Chinese factory without protective equipment cataloguing toxic items to pay your dad's debt. You were beaten twice when you tried to escape. Is this correct?' The interpreter asks.

'Yes.' He answers softly. He feels as though his skin is being peeled off layer after layer till only his shame is left. He wants to forget Russia and the room with the unreachable small window where he was forced to have sex with a stranger. He washed himself repeatedly till his skin threatened to peel. The thought of AIDS made

him vomit. Sitting, back against the wall, he tightened a trouser leg around his neck making himself choke.

That interpreter mentions the boat so often that he has to cover his mouth as the seasickness returns. He can smell the sea. After hours at sea, the boat reached land. Black guys covered his head, pushed him into a car drove for hours then shoved him into a warehouse. He hated the unbearable odour of cannabis plants. Day did not exist. The artificial light made everything surreal, as though in a dream. One day, he used the secateurs to cut a hole in the tarpaulin. He panicked when light hit his eyes. He glimpsed his surroundings which looked like an abandoned factory.

'How dare you?' The men rushed to kick him.

He felt out of breath and each inch of his body hurt. They chained his leg to the radiator and left him without food and water. He woke terribly thirsty but thrilled to see a hammer they had forgotten to put away. Hammering broke the chain, he let out a yell. With a knife from the kitchen, he cut the tarpaulin, shielded his eyes, then threw down the mattress and blanket and climbed out. Finally he took a deep breath and dropped. The jump was painful but no broken bones or sprained ankle. He dragged his leg with the chain until he reached the road. The wind made him tremble. Hunger slowed him, every part of his body ached. It could be hours till he reached a village. His heart leapt when he saw a policeman leaving a post office. Rushing to the shop, he cried uncontrollably before answering the policeman.

He lost count of time in the detention centre. Outside there is only the ink veil of the sky. He barely notices his food. His brain is a dense fog and he cannot remember the last time he had a delicious Vietnamese meal. His asylum application was rejected. His victim of human trafficking application has been granted. Many Vietnamese people reach other countries through real or fake marriage. People born with intelligence and luck find ways to study abroad with scholarships or their parents' money. People like him are begging for a better life; a new kind of boat people with roots in the thousands of years of bloody battles fought by foreigners in Vietnam. He does not have the heart to make things up regarding gender or religion to improve the status of his asylum application. Life has been bitter for him. Does he need to add more trouble?

Time freezes in the detention centre. His nightmares return. Sometimes he wakes around two in the dark room, gasping for air. He sees vividly in his dream that he is marching in the forest with some guys. They walked from Russia to France in just over a month. He prayed silently every hour 'Please Sky, do not let me die' till he believed that he was a devoted religious follower. He bit his nails till they bled, trying to calm himself and bring back reality. 'Please Sky, let me die of a heart attack now.'

A member of staff takes him to the Glasgow Sheriff court. As he leans out of the car, rain slaps his face and crystal air rushes into his nostrils. He greets his solicitor and interpreter. The screeching door captures attention. The judge walks towards his chair. Outside the window two rainbows glisten in the sunlight. At that very moment something enters his mind.

Double rainbows are shining brightly
What marvelous light bridges I can see
Above the court, outside the trees
Why are birds free but not me?

'You arrived illegally in the UK on the twelfth of September 2023, and worked at a cannabis farm in Glasgow from the fourteenth September 2023 till the ninth of June 2024.'

TORRY SHOWS WE HAVE MADE NO PROGRESS ON ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

'A Play for Torry' tells of how they paved paradise and put up an incinerator, a landfill site and not even a parking lot, writes
Peter McColl.

It's a warm summer evening, and in Aberdeen an evening like this is worth savouring. I'm walking through a wooded glade of deciduous and coniferous trees. Swallows and house martins swoop and hawk above my head, there is a gentle breeze on my face. It is a memory that lives with me.

From the nearby hill there is another memorable view. Memorable for very different reasons. To the left sits a newly imposed harbour, with industrial ships, then there is a sewage works and then as you scan the horizon a covered-over landfill site. Turn to the right and there is an incinerator with its chimney billowing. As you turn around there are houses now abandoned because they were built with a cheap form of concrete called RAAC that means they have been condemned.

I first encountered the idea of environmental justice more than twenty years ago. The idea that social injustice works by degrading the environment in which poorer people live and work. This view makes environmental injustice brutally clear. Poor housing, pollution, the destruction of natural spaces like the beach and now the park. Unimaginable in a rich community.

These two places are only a ten-minute walk from each other in Torry, one of the poorest parts of Scotland. Across the river are some of the richest parts of Aberdeen. The gap in life expectancy is more than ten years.

A Play for Torry tells the story of the area from the earliest records, spanning almost a millennium, through to the present. It shows how Torry became the dumping ground, metaphorically and literally, for Aberdeen's most undesirable facilities and its rubbish. At times, the governing attitude seems to have been that one more blight would do little damage to a place already made to endure so much.

Developed in collaboration with the local community, the production is co-created with residents, artists and campaigners in Torry. Built from real voices and lived experience, it blends verbatim storytelling, ensemble performance, live music and an original score. The result is not just a piece of documentary theatre, but something more ambitious and more communal: part ceilidh, part protest, part love-letter to a place that has repeatedly been told to accept sacrifice in the name of somebody else's progress.

Drawing on the tradition of the Theatre of the Oppressed, the production brings together professional actors and community members. Co-written by Mae Diansangu, Shane Strachan and Emer Morris, with direction from Emer Morris and Annabel Lunney, and original music from Coralie Usmani and Simon Gall, I saw it in the clubhouse of Nigg Bay Golf Club on a windy night in February. Outside, the weather was harsh. Inside, the room was warm and packed for the performance.

This is powerful because it isn't a retelling of Torry's history as a dry recount of injuries to the place. It is funny, moving, angry and defiant. The cast carry the audience through centuries of dispossession with humour, pace and feeling. You can feel the anger, but also the solidarity. The play refuses the idea that communities like Torry should appear only as victims. It presents them too as witnesses, organisers, singers, and fighters, fighters with humour.

St Fittick's Park, where I stood on that earlier summer evening, is now being torn up for an "energy transition zone". The green of the trees is to be replaced by greenwash. Yet we are still not clear what the "energy transition zone" is actually for. The Bay of Nigg harbour beside the park has been justified in a succession of ways: as a base for extracting the last of the North Sea's oil and gas, as a hub for offshore wind, even as a stopping point for cruise ships bringing visitors to Balmoral. The "energy transition zone" has acquired the same vagueness. Its purpose shifts, but the destruction remains constant.

The neighbouring industrial estates in Altens and Tullos are more than half empty, so why destroy a beautiful and much-loved park?

Some say it is to make the new harbour stack up commercially. Some say it is about capturing the profit to be made from replacing public green space with offices and light industrial units. Whatever the precise explanation, what is clear is that capital still has the power to appropriate a valued community resource from a place that has already endured more than enough.

Looming over this story is Ian Wood: oil baron, sometime billionaire and untiring enemy of Aberdeen's green spaces until his death in July. Set against him was the wonderful and much-missed Renée Slater. In 2012, during an earlier attempt by Wood to seize another cherished public space, Union Terrace Gardens, she nominated a mannequin for the council under the name "Helena Torry, the voice of the silent majority". It made the national news, reflecting the humour and resistance that were at the heart of both Renée and the campaign to save Union Terrace Gardens.

We were greeted by Helena on our way into the play. Union Terrace Gardens escaped Wood's grasp. St Fittick's Park has not been so lucky.

The production takes the audience on a journey from the arrival of St Fittick, who gave his name to the now-ruined church in the park, to the twenty-first century. The people of Torry lost their homes in the oil rush, their beach in the oil slump, and now their park in the age of renewables. The actors convey that history with verve, charm and force.

What *A Play for Torry* understands especially well is that this is not simply a local planning dispute. It is a question about the

politics of transition itself. The production asks, directly, who the “Just Transition” is really for, and what it costs when decisions about climate and land are made without the people who live with the consequences. Rooted in Torry, it plainly resonates beyond Aberdeen, because the pattern is familiar across Scotland: industrial and coastal communities promised renewal, consulted late if at all, and expected once again to bear the burden.

There is a direct line from the destruction of old Torry to make way for oil infrastructure, through the siting of Aberdeen’s most undesirable facilities in the area, continuing with the construction of housing now deemed unfit and awaiting demolition, and ending with the removal of vital green space in the name of transition.

At its heart, the story of Torry is about corporate power: first in the age of oil, now at the end of the oil age, capturing the language

of net zero and “transition”. *A Play for Torry* shows how communities are asked, again and again, to surrender health, memory and public space for a prosperity accumulated elsewhere. The destruction of the park has begun, but the public case for destroying it remains as thin as ever. That is what greenwash looks like when used against a community already treated as expendable.

The play succeeds because it combines politics with craft. It does not merely document injustice. It reflects a community’s struggle in language and song with humour and integrity.

FIRE FIRE, FIRE FIRE!

Ian McGregor of the Fire Brigades Union and **Phil Chetwynd** lay bare the hazards faced by our firefighters in a dangerous changing climate.

It is not a sound that most people would like to hear in their neighbourhood. We are however usually content to see the flashing lights and hear the blaring sirens of the fire engines rushing to the scene, safe in the knowledge that the firefighters on board will soon have everything under control.

But few are aware of the health and safety issues that our firefighters have to contend with in their day-to-day work. In 2026, the landscape of the firefighters’ work is shifting. More and more complex risks are emerging than ever before, from the rise of lithium-ion batteries and electrical vehicle fires to the frequency of extreme weather events such as flooding and wildfires. These aren’t just ‘occupational hazards’, but challenges that require continuous adaptation and innovation in training, operational procedures, and equipment.

Climate change is playing a major role in making these destructive fires even more dangerous. Strong winds, extreme temperatures, and low rainfall can leave trees, shrubs and fallen leaves and grass dry and primed to fuel a fire. There were 241 recorded wildfires in Scotland last year. In Edinburgh last August a fire on Arthur’s Seat required crews from Edinburgh and the Lothians to attend for eight days. In July, another Arthur’s Seat fire saw crews deployed for multiple days. The Scottish Fire Service also attends over 1600 flooding incidents a year. These range from villages being evacuated by boat, to ensuring homes and buildings are kept safe in extreme adverse conditions.

There are also hidden hazards that the general public know little about. Did you know that firefighting is now designated as a ‘carcinogenic’ occupation? The WHO and the IARC (International Agency for Research on Cancer) have both confirmed this. Cancer death rates for firefighters are 1.6 times higher than the general population. And for some specific cancers things are even worse. For Prostate Cancer the rates are 3.8 times higher; for Leukemia it’s 3.2 times higher; and for esophageal cancers the rates are 2.4 times higher. Firefighters aged 35-39 have up to 323% higher cancer incidence than those in the general public. Those serving 15+ years are

1.7 times more likely to suffer cancer, with skin cancer most prevalent (36% of cancer diagnoses in one study).

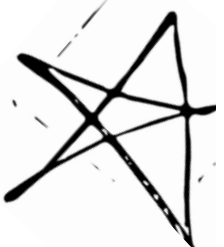
Several countries worldwide have taken this on by putting protections in place, officially recognising firefighting cancers as occupational hazards, and treating them like asbestos hazards. Scotland and the wider UK does not. Instead, the authorities are asking for more research. It’s hard to stomach that in Donald Trump’s America firefighters have more protection than in the UK.

This is why Fire Brigades Union campaigns such as ‘Decon’ (decontamination) are vital in order to ensure that we have the correct processes for decontamination at the incident and back at the station. We must mitigate the danger of toxins, not only for ourselves but also for our families at home.

We must also look after our own mental health and that of our comrades. Contaminants are causing higher rates of mental distress, with firefighters three times more likely to suffer from depression, and twice as likely to suffer with anxiety. A firefighter who is not mentally supported is not a safe firefighter.

There is one final point of great importance, and that is the contribution that the general public has to make for our common safety. Tenants and local councils must ensure that high-rise buildings are constructed of safe materials and are well maintained, with clear plans of action if the alarm is raised during an emergency. Business owners must take their fire risk assessments seriously and implement the findings properly. And, finally, on a personal level, make sure you have a functioning smoke detector in your home. You are four times more likely to die in a fire if you do not have a working smoke alarm.

Sadly, the hazards and risks outlined here must be viewed in the context of diminishing numbers of firefighters. Over 1,200 jobs have been lost to the service since the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service was established in 2013. The FBU warns that further budget constraints could lead to another 500+ job losses over the next three years. We must not let that happen.



THE LITTLE BOOK OF STARS

By Jean Rafferty.



The Little Book of Stars was a book about astronomy which was used in schools in Afghanistan before the Taliban took over.

Up here in the mountains the stars
are sharp as ice, a blizzard of lights
across the night sky. We didn't
know they had names before the teacher
came. She told us of Aldebaran,
glowing red, and the blue mass
of Rigel. We see it now but soon
it will go forever, a black hole.

We are used to this.

She said out there beyond our mountains
there were women who sailed the stars.
Chaika, the first was called, Seagull.
Forty eight times she circled
the earth, scanning the blue horizon.
She was sick all the time but she looked
down at the earth's luscious sheen
and she said the world was beautiful.

She never came here.

The boys all wanted to be astronauts
but I was the only girl.

I still have my Little Book of Stars
though I try not to look at it now.
My sister was angry. She tossed
her books away. Wake up,
she said. Useless to dream
of things we'll never have.

There are many things we'll never have.

Our brother says he'll teach us what
he learns, but it's just Koran, Koran,
Koran in the school now. Sometimes
at night I take my chadhor off
and sit on the roof to watch the sky.
It's cool up there and I can breathe,
free of that hateful prison they make us
walk around in. But mostly we just make roti.

And the boys, they learn how to use guns.



Our regular poetry slot comes from Dove Tales, a registered charity which uses the arts to campaign for peace and against the increasing militarisation of our society



Dove Tales are always looking for contributions to their blog and online projects. To submit poems, stories, music or artwork email Jean Rafferty (fireopal.jeanrafferty@outlook.com).

THE GAZA ROADMAP TO NOWHERE

Chris Sutherland reviews the ominous plans and promises of Trump's Board of Peace.

On 6th July 2026 Hamas formally stepped down as the government of Gaza. The announcement was made by Ismail Al-Thawabta on behalf of the 'Gaza Emergency Committee' in the ruins of Gaza City.¹ Hamas then invited President Trump's Board of Peace (BOP)'s 'National Committee for the Administration of Gaza' (NCAG) to take over the machinery of administration, saying that existing administrative personnel on the ground would remain in post to facilitate their entry into Gaza. Hamas's historic announcement went largely unreported, buried in the inside pages. The BOP said it was 'noted', whilst Israel's Foreign Minister, Gideon Saar, described it as a 'stunt'.

The NCAG is the technocratic body of 15 'experts' nominated to take over the running of Gaza on behalf of President Trump's 'Board of Peace' (BOP) which was founded with great pomp and ceremony in January 2026.² People will remember Trump sitting on his throne in front of invited delegates last January and inviting the uninvited to pay a fee of \$1bn cash should they wish to join.³

Faces at the inaugural BOP gathering in Davos included a rogue's gallery of despots and tyrants including most of the Middle East's dictators, as well as fascists like Argentina's Javier Milei, Hungary's Viktor Orban, Belarus's Lukashenka, and to top it all the wanted 'war criminal' himself, Benjamin Netanyahu, appearing alongside special guest, Tony Blair, the butcher of Iraq – all paying homage to Donald J Trump sitting like a latter-day Emperor.

Trump rounded on the United Nations saying the BOP was the new international world order, replacing the UN itself, to which the UN cravenly responded by voting to mandate the BOP to implement Gaza's Roadmap to peace and reconstruction with Resolution 2803. What!? A resolution mandating two of the warring parties, Israel and the US, to dictate the terms of peace in Gaza?

Middle East Eye Editor David Hearst writes:

'To invite the same cast of characters who allowed Israel to expand to the point at which Gaza exploded and expect them to end the conflict is more than just insane, it's criminal ... Trump is running Gaza and the world like a mafia boss.'⁴

There seemed to be two visions for a post-war Gaza. One, sold to the Arab and Muslim world, was of Gaza being flooded with aid and the international community pouring in to rescue a ravaged people, to re-build a ravaged land, with Gazans being allowed to remain in their homeland free from Israeli threats as part of a wider framework for Palestine and the Middle East. The other was peddled by Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner and Netanyahu, and portrayed in the Gaza Riviera project. The unelected Kushner delivered his 'Gaza Master Plan' presenting glossy diagrams of 'down town' Gaza with its development phases and multi-billion beach fronts – seemingly without any Gazans present.

Middle East Eye's Jonathon Cook described the BOP as an 'Updated East India Company' whereby 'Billionaires and their hangers-on will openly decide the fate of weak nations based on the power elites' naked, predatory instincts to make money.'⁵

The BOP was supposed to be inundated with cash from eager donor countries to raise an initial \$7bn budget. The NCAG was then appointed to carry things out, overseen by their special Envoy, the

former Bulgarian MEP Nikolay Mladenov, a former UN peace envoy in Iraq. A special seat on the BOP was reserved for Tony Blair.⁶

The basic model for the 20-point Roadmap in October 2025 was for the warring parties to declare an indefinite ceasefire. A series of phases would see the release of hostages in exchange for prisoners, aid flooding in, and Israel withdrawing to a buffer line. The second phase was to involve Hamas giving way to a new civil authority backed by newly trained police, and guaranteed by an 'International Stabilisation Force' made up of contingents from overseas countries. Negotiations over deconfliction included disarmament and an Israeli withdrawal, running in tandem with various programmes of reconstruction.

That was six months ago. But what about now?

When the ceasefire was signed on 10th October, everyone expected the guns to fall silent and for international relief to pour in, to help the two million survivors traumatised by two years of genocide, and allow the seriously sick and wounded to be allowed out for treatment. Everyone expected Israel to fall behind their self-declared Yellow buffer zone. Journalists were expected to be allowed in and Rafah fully opened, with heavy machinery also allowed in to start clearing the rubble, and international relief agencies permitted to begin their restorative work. There was even talk of landing ships on the beaches delivering emergency aid such as field kitchens and more field hospitals. The Erez and Karni crossings would open for freight. The huge warehouses in Jordan and Egypt would finally be allowed to shift the millions of tonnes of embargoed aid.

A new Palestinian Authority-style police force would take over from Hamas and the technocrats on the NCAG, and be allowed to form a new interim government and civil administration. Hamas intimated that they would be prepared to make way and give up their heavy weaponry, retaining only light arms for self-defence. They declared that they would be prepared to disarm as part of an internationally supervised process, quoting the example of the disarmament process in Northern Ireland as part of the Good Friday peace agreement.

With reconstruction and peace assured, a new society would emerge and the question of self-determination of Palestinians put firmly back on the agenda. Above all, Gazans would remain in their homeland. There was to be no forced migration or transfer of population. Gaza would be for the Palestinians, free from the threat of Israeli attack, guaranteed by the 'International Stabilisation Force' made up of international peace-keepers.

But this isn't what happened.

Firstly, Israel remained in occupation behind an encroaching buffer zone controlling 55% of Gaza. Two, they began a process of extending their 'Yellow Line' of boundary markers, declaring these areas free fire zones, and shooting and killing anyone who entered, seizing more and more territory and undertaking a programme of mass demolitions behind the buffer zone. Second, there have been daily ceasefire violations, almost exclusively by Israel, involving sniper fire, drone and air attacks, artillery strikes and shelling by sea. The BOP has said nothing about this.

The blockade of Gaza continued, restricting food, fuel, medicines and supplies, denying entry of heavy lifting equipment and the thousands of mobile homes that had been intended for Gaza to relieve the misery of living in tents and amongst ruins.

Bit by bit Gaza's Yellow Line became a new Orange Line, eating up whole areas of the enclave, 60%, 65%, now 70% by instruction from Netanyahu, the beleaguered, starved population having to live in ever smaller and more restricted areas around Gaza City, Deir al-Balah and al-Mawasi.

Behind the Yellow/Orange line there is a plethora of new forts and defensive positions behind 25km of earth Berms. Forensic Architecture's satellite imaging from Planet Labs has detailed and mapped 48 new forts verified by 'before' and 'after' imaging.⁷ It shows whole areas of southern and eastern Gaza completely flattened into a desert landscape, and a massive fortification at the Bani Suehila crossroads in Eastern Khan Younis. Where once there was city, now there is nothing but ruin, the Mediterranean Sea clearly visible in the distance.⁸

The facts of the ceasefire are this:⁹

- 3,465 violations in 260 days
- 1,059 killed and 3,429 injured
- Just 35% of the agreed aid allowed in
- 156,000 projected — just 55,000 allowed in
- 113 Palestinians reported kidnapped by IDF
- Just 8,016 out of 21,000 allowed out for treatment

In a recent trip to Amman, the International Development Committee Chair, Sarah Champion, reported 20 full-to-bursting warehouses of international aid, rotting after being refused transit by Israel. The Rafah Crossing still not restored and COGAT still obstructing aid. The same calculated starvation as a weapon of war against a civilian population causing mass hunger, thirst, sickness, disease and death.

The current death toll (7.6.26) stands at 73,100 killed and 173,575 injured with an estimated 10,000- 20,000 missing and unaccounted for. Statistical studies by the Lancet using comparative conflicts to calculate 'Excess Deaths' put the figures much higher, by as much as 35%.¹⁰ Israel's constant bulldozing and flattening of Gaza means they've also covered up the forensic evidence of their war crimes.

Forensic Architecture satellite imaging in December 2025 revealed something far more sinister. The areas around Rafah, Mawasi and Khan Younis have been carefully monitored since the days when the so-called Gaza Humanitarian Fund food massacres where an estimated 2,600 were killed as Palestinians were herded into food collection zones and some 19,000 were injured.

Forensic Architecture have spotted the imprint of two holding camps for Palestinians.¹¹ Estimated at around 20,000-capacity each, they are intended to be used to screen and filter Palestinians prior to so-called 'voluntary emigration'. Those refusing to enter will be left to rot in their tent cities amongst the ruins, while the holding camps tempt starving people with the prospect of food and care, to enter dystopian Green and Red Zones but never be allowed back.

'Haaretz' recently reported on a top level meeting of its Security Council, where members including Mossad, Shin Bet and top military brass were 'encouraging voluntary emigration'.¹² 'The Jerusalem Post' recently reported another top level meeting of the IDF Southern Command looking at ways to enforce the disarmament of Hamas in conjunction with the BOP's 'International Stabilisation Force' currently under US command at Kiryat Gat in southern Israel and working in tandem with the IDF.¹³ The ISF has just taken delivery of armoured vehicles and equipment. The problem is that this is primarily a US force, not the international force originally envisioned back in September 2025 and no other countries appear to be involved. This is in itself a violation of the Roadmap and not likely to be welcomed by the local Gazan population or the Resistance.

The US and Israel working together would never be looked on as an acceptable neutral force.

Moreover members of the meeting bemoaned the fact that no country had as yet come forward to accept displaced Gazans, nor was there much likelihood of this in the aftermath of Israel and the US attacking Iran and the war in Lebanon. One casualty of the wars is that the BOP has received scant funding from the Gulf. The much vaunted \$7bn simply hasn't materialised.

There have also been problems training a Palestinian Police Force in Egypt. The UAE has given \$100m to train a police force but take-up has been primarily Jordanians and Egyptians, again reinforcing the perception of an alien police force being imposed on the population of Gaza. The UAE are using their own private contractors rather than going through the BOP — one of the disadvantages of outsourcing! Meanwhile the 'Times of Israel' report training sessions for the NCAG in Egypt and Cyprus suggesting they are nowhere near ready to enter Gaza to start their work. One of the training bodies is the Tony Blair Institute, led, of course, by a leading figure in the Quartet that blockaded Gaza in 2007.¹⁴

Indeed the whole six months of the BOP's UN mandate has passed without any real progress. Hamas stepping down as the governing entity is therefore designed to hurry the process along. To deflect criticism Nikolay Mladenov and Israel Katz are continuing to blame Hamas for not disarming, when both know that Israel is on the verge of launching fresh attacks. Netanyahu is up for election in October and needs his 'forever wars' to stay in power and avoid jail on corruption charges.

In the meantime Israel entrenches further into Gaza, looking even more likely never to withdraw. Smotrich has boasted he has three settlements just waiting to go into northern Gaza. The likeliest path for the Gaza Genocide will be continued Israeli encroachment, a renewal of the offensive against the civilian population, the creation of processing camps to effect enforced migration and using the BOP/ISF as cover and as an active participant in the ethnic cleaning of Gaza. Those who don't move will be starved, killed and injured, surviving amidst the rubble of their tented cities, and all with a United Nations mandate.

Israel must withdraw completely from Gaza. The peacemakers and international aid must be allowed in to begin the task of reconstruction, along with journalists. Palestinians must be free to determine what kind of society they wish to live in, protected against future aggression by international guarantee.

1. Reuters 'Hamas dissolves Gaza Government: Israel dismisses move as a 'stunt'
- 6.7.26. Drop Site News 'Hamas Government dissolves' 6.7.26.
2. Middle East Eye 'Technocratic Committee overseeing Gaza transition revealed'
- 15.1.26. They included Ali Shaath (Planning), Omar Shamali (Communications), Abdul Ashour (Agriculture), Aed Yaghi (Health), Aed Ramadan (Industry & Economy), Jabr al-Daour (Education), Bashir al-Rayes (Finance), Ali Barhoum (Water & Municipalities) + 6 others
3. New York Times '\$1bn in cash buys a permanent seat on Trump's Board of Peace'
- 18.1.26.
4. MEE 'Trump is running Gaza and the world like a mafia boss' David Hearst, 20.1.26.
5. Jonathan Cook 'Trump's BOP is the nail in Gaza's coffin' 23.1.26 (JC Blog).
6. Al Jazeera 'Trump names Tony Blair, Jared Kushner to Gaza Board of Peace' 16.1.26.
7. Drop Site News 'Israel is preparing for a permanent presence in Gaza' 20.12.25.
8. Forensic Architecture 24.5.26. Drop Site News 'Israel has physically divided Gaza'
- 25.5.26. I have maps, diagrams and photographs in my journals.
9. Al Jazeera's AJ Labs 'Explainer: how many times has Israel violated the Gaza Ceasefire' 30.6.25.
10. Lancet Global Health Report 4.4.26 looked at comparative statistics covering the period 7.10.23-5.1.25. The recorded death total then was 49,090 which Lancet modelling re-calculated at 75,200, with Excess deaths at 8,540 and Non-Violent deaths at 16,300.
11. Forensic Architecture Planet Labs 26.2.26 'Rafah concentration camp preps' (photo in my journal pp. 2525). Middle East Eye 'Concentration Camp: Israel's planned new city in Rafah' 10.7.25. Al Jazeera 'Israel's plans for Rafah camp in Gaza' 28.1.26.
12. Haaretz 'Top Israeli Defence officials call urgent meeting on plan to displace Gazans' 23.6.26. Middle East Eye 'Israeli officials discuss renewed push to expel Palestinians from Gaza' 24.6.26.
13. Jerusalem Post 'IDF working to strengthen ISF' 4.7.26.
14. Times of Israel 'BOP finalising plans for Gaza but implementation timeline in the air' 1.7.26.

EMBRACING ALIENATION: UNITED IN UNHAPPINESS?

Kieran Murphy reviews *Embracing Alienation: Why We Shouldn't Try to Find Ourselves* by Todd McGowan (Repeater Books, 2026).

Alienation, in Todd McGowan's scheme, arises from an irreconcilable tension between one's outward identity and inward subjectivity. Personal identity provides us a sturdy, rationalising frame by which we might offload subjectivity's untidy complexity and flux – *I'm a professor, a parent, a Scotsman, an activist, a good listener* – but the array of titles by which we might orient ourselves in a wider social context never quite squares with the dynamism and subterranean mystery of inner life.

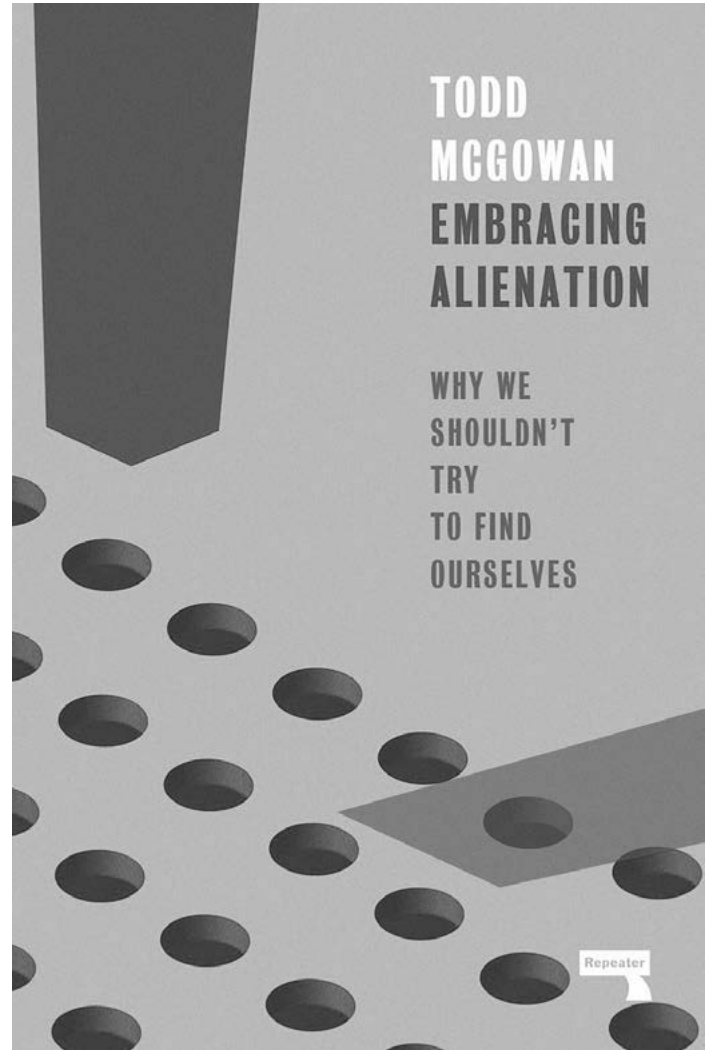
Regarding alienation as a tensile gap at once inborn and irreconcilable, McGowan argues, allows us to reconsider the dilemma of alienation not as a problem to pathologize or negate, but as a shared condition which unifies us all; we suffer more, after all, for the imagined wholeness we are perpetually failing to achieve than from alienation itself. This recognition, the tagline on the back boldly claims, *could be the basis of our emancipation*. Alienation, in this scheme, holds some homologies with just about every other expression of Lacanian lack – we can forget about any pretence to its ultimate resolution, as they would probably entail being dead.

McGowan's most interesting argument within this particular framework of alienation is his proposed amendment to the orthodox-Marxist assumption that alienation originates largely from the complex of capitalist relations. Opposing an image of a mythic, nonalienated past, McGowan argues instead that the age of capitalism demarcates a sociohistorical turn at which alienation *inherent* in the subject is rendered inescapably visible, that it is the capitalist system's capacity to uproot and provide a glut of potential vessels for gnawing lack that lays bare the latent alienation which always was. The true insidiousness of capitalism, where alienation is concerned, lies in the perpetual promise of transcending alienation, whether through avenues of accumulation, or through fetishizing a kind of life one ought to be living and isn't. McGowan explores this particular vein more thoroughly in his 2016 work, *Capitalism and Desire*.

Embracing Alienation is a short work of ~150 pages. Were one to limit themselves to the intro, conclusion, and first chapter, they'd have read something resembling a slim, prescriptive self-help title, but the bulk of the book reads more like an archaeological excavation, tracing a lineage of alienation across centuries, making case studies of literature, philosophy, and popular culture, charting the social and psychic alterations the alienated subject sustains from one historical moment to the next.

Despite its broad survey of headier subject matter (Shakespeare, Marx, Descartes, Heidegger, Kant, *Battlestar Gallactica*), the work's decidedly Zizekian bent, treating the social via the psychoanalytic (keep a look out for the lengthy exegesis of a Stalin joke), is accomplished in concise and comprehensible language that keeps the work accessible to a general reader. It's Lacanian without the Lacanianisms, academic but not abstruse, and avoids obscurantism as a rule.

This brevity also invites didacticism; one notices virtually every subsection begins and ends in tight, assertive aphorisms, which might beg more incisive analysis than the work's concise form permits. This is remedied somewhat by the work's extensive use of



endnotes, which allow for further exegesis on points not precisely concerned with a given chapter's task-at-hand. Just as often, the endnotes function as a repository for non-consequential asides and personal anecdotes, which are nevertheless entertaining enough in their own right.

For a sceptic, the promise of embracing alienation as a *basis for emancipation* may seem just as utopian as the Marxist-idealist's vision of harmonious and total non-alienation in a post-capitalist world. Perhaps McGowan's promise is more measured and mature: emancipation for McGowan doesn't equate to utopian futures or the illusion of perpetual fulfillment, it is rather a matter of aspiring toward a comparatively prosaic and banal station which, should one attain it, might be received in much the same fashion as an ideal recipient of Freudian analysis, which is to say, they find their *hysterical misery* transformed into *common unhappiness*.

PAUL SNEDDON: BLISTERING SATIRIST, DEDICATED SOCIALIST

Tommy Sheppard pays tribute to Paul Sneddon, a.k.a. Vladimir McTavish, one of Scotland's outstanding comedians and a long-term *Scottish Left Review* contributor, who died in July 2026.

Paul Sneddon, Scottish actor and comedian, known for his creations Vladimir McTavish and Bob Doolally, died at the start of July, after an eight-month fight with cancer.

Amongst other things he was a regular contributor to this magazine, penning the satirical column "A Kick Up The Tabloids" for many years.

I first met Paul in the summer of 1995 when he debuted at the Edinburgh festival as Vladimir McTavish. Vladimir was more than a stage name; he was an alter-ego. Paul developed the act into a brash, take no prisoners, opinionated satirist. A high-status act, exemplifying without apology a new confidence that was beginning to grow in Scottish cultural and political life.

Even the name said what it did on the tin. The combination of Vladimir (from the Bolshevik Lenin not the oligarch Putin) and the quintessential Scottishness of McTavish describing to a tee the Caledonian leftie. For sure the performance required exaggeration, but whilst the loud foulmouthed rants might have contrasted with the gentle modesty of the creator, in their opinions and targets McTavish and Sneddon were as one.

This was a far cry from the cringing self-parody of the past. Vladimir McTavish railed against injustice and inequality on the one hand and the mundanity and absurdity of officialdom on the other. He became the best satirist of his generation, always topical, nothing off limits. He didn't attack authority for the sake of it, or to get a cheap laugh. He selected deserving targets, those who he saw as responsible for the misery and oppression of others. Favourites were Tory politicians and the Donald.

It wasn't just politics. He generated much material from observing the Scots relationship with alcohol, noting you didn't have to think too hard to work out where Stevenson got the inspiration for Jekyll and Hyde. Typical was his excoriation of the Scottish government's public health campaign to tackle problem drinking. Pouring scorn on the question "have you ever drank more than you intended to?", Vladimir suggested that a more effective enquiry might be "Have you ever drank so much you broke a limb and blamed it on fruit?"

McTavish was blistering funny, and there was a point to his comedy. He had something to say. The act became an exemplar for a new generation of Scottish comics that was to follow in the decade to come.

When I first met Paul, we had started the Stand Comedy Club as a hobby, determined to provide a platform for Scottish performers

in their capital city. From the word go he shared that endeavour, and he became a regular headliner at the club in Christies. But it was his off-stage contribution which really mattered. As the club grew, and particularly when it moved into the full-time venue at York Place, Paul was instrumental in making links with promoters and acts across the UK.

As well as acting as the club's ambassador, helping us as a new entrant gain credibility in a highly competitive industry, Paul also became a mentor for those hoping to follow in his footsteps. Over the decades thousands of people have had a go at stand-up in the Stand's Red Raw shows. For many it is an experience best forgotten by all concerned. But Paul always found something positive to say about everyone, always gave encouragement. And there are performers today who would have given up without it.

Paul brought the skills and discipline of his theatrical training to the development of his stand up. That was evident in the pared down punchlines and animated expressions of Vlad. But it really showed as he developed the new character of Bob Doolally, the superannuated alcoholic pundit that became his vehicle to satirise the Scottish male obsession with football. I had a ringside seat to watch the painstaking work that went into developing Doolally, honing the script, choreographing movement, perfecting every aspect from hair and costume to intonation and accent. This was a dedicated professional at work.

In the late-night camaraderie we enjoyed after gigs, I came to realise that I shared with Paul not just a love of stand-up, but pretty much an entire world view. From an early age Paul was a socialist, outraged at the inequality and injustice of the world around him. He was an internationalist, and like many of us, in this century he came to embrace the cause of Scottish independence, believing that with the powers of new state we could not only build a better Scotland, but a better world.

These are the ideas that informed his stand up. It meant he was an act always worth seeing, one that was relevant in an industry sadly always drawn to the mediocre and banal. And it meant he was always first in line whenever a benefit was being organised to raise funds for causes he believed in, whether fighting poverty and disease, or standing up for human rights in Palestine and elsewhere.

Paul Sneddon's career stands as an inspiration to the new generation of Scottish comic performers. Let us hope they live up to his memory.

SCOTLAND JOINS AXIS OF EVIL SHOCK

In memory of the unforgettable **Vladimir McTavish**, we republish his 'Kick Up the Tabloids' column published exactly twenty years ago in Issue 35, July/August 2006. If you fancy a few more Kicks, find them on the *Scottish Left Review* website.

Over the past month or so, those of us who despaired of Scotland ever regaining confidence in itself as a nation were given a much needed tonic, and surprisingly it was provided by the Scottish Executive. Jack McConnell finally stood up to Westminster on two vital issues of national importance, nuclear power and who he would be supporting in the World Cup. Predictably it was the Scots in the Westminster Cabinet who let us down. Firstly, Gordon Brown, surprisingly enough for someone who wants to become Prime Minister of the whole of the UK, claimed he would be supporting England, although simple arithmetic of how many votes are to be won in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland is the clue to why he did so.

Secondly, Alistair Darling contradicted McConnell by saying that Scotland may need to build more nuclear power stations, to provide electricity for England. This is ridiculous in a nation so rich in potential renewables... tidal, wind, hydro. OK, solar is a bit of a non-starter for 11 months of the year but if anyone ever develops the potential for generating power from mist, fog or light drizzle, Scotland will be the most energy-rich nation on Earth. Incidentally, I can never hear the name Alistair Darling without conjuring up a mental picture of some Morningside Amateur Dramatic group having a production meeting. "Esme Darling, your in charge of costumes, Virginia Lovie you're in charge of make-up, Alistair Darling you're in charge of transport and the regions."

No sooner had Jack McConnell declared his support for Trinidad and Tobago than the New Labour thought police in London had to intervene. Not content with controlling virtually other aspect of our lives, they now appeared to want to dictate what football team we support. Although I think they overestimated the influence Jack has over his fellow Scots. I was surprised that support for England did not swell after his comments, from people refusing to support the same team as the bloke who's stopped them smoking in the pub. Blair predictably got involved with some ludicrous soundbitery. First by claiming Scots were racist for not supporting England, although how it can be racist to support Trinidad baffled most of us. Secondly, he blamed the Tartan Army for attacks on people wearing England shirts. As for the attack on the seven-year-old in Edinburgh's Inverleith Park, my view is the child was plain unlucky. The chances of bumping into a Scottish person in Stockbridge are very rare. And frankly, I also blame his parents. The child in question is called Hugo, so he's going to get a kicking every day once he goes up to secondary school.

While the attacks are despicable, to blame the Tartan Army is at best wrong and at worst dangerous. The Tartan Army are as a peaceful bunch of fans as you'll find anywhere. Indeed at most major tournaments, they win the best behaved supporters award, mainly because they're not there long enough to start any trouble. What is dangerous is that as soon as Blair blames the Tartan Army for attacks on English people, George Bush will be adding them to axis of evil along with Iran and North Korea. Even now, he may well be looking up his atlas to find out where Tartania is. The CIA may

well be on the case too. "Mr President, it's not just the Tartanians we want to invade, it's the Scots too. They're developing chemical weapons. According to their own newspapers, they're sitting on a diabetes and heart disease timebomb."

Also, this summer the Royal Scottish National Orchestra conducted a poll on what song we wanted as our National Anthem, We had the choice, among others, of Scots Wha Hae, Flower of Scotland, A Man's a Man for A' That and Highland Cathedral (ironically written by a German). Votes poured in from the Aberdeen area suggesting "If You Hate the Fucking English Clap Your Hands" but thankfully not enough to sway the result. One glaring omission from the list in my opinion was Donald Where's Your Troosers?, which could be updated in reference to the continued vandalism of the statue of the father of the nation as Donald Where's Your Glasses?

Blair further went on to insult Scots by suggesting we should have a State Funeral for Margaret Thatcher. Most Scots don't think this goes far enough. We want a day off work, a bank holiday, street parties and a big televised gig in Hyde Park compered by Ben Elton.





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Cailean Gallagher, Editor

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