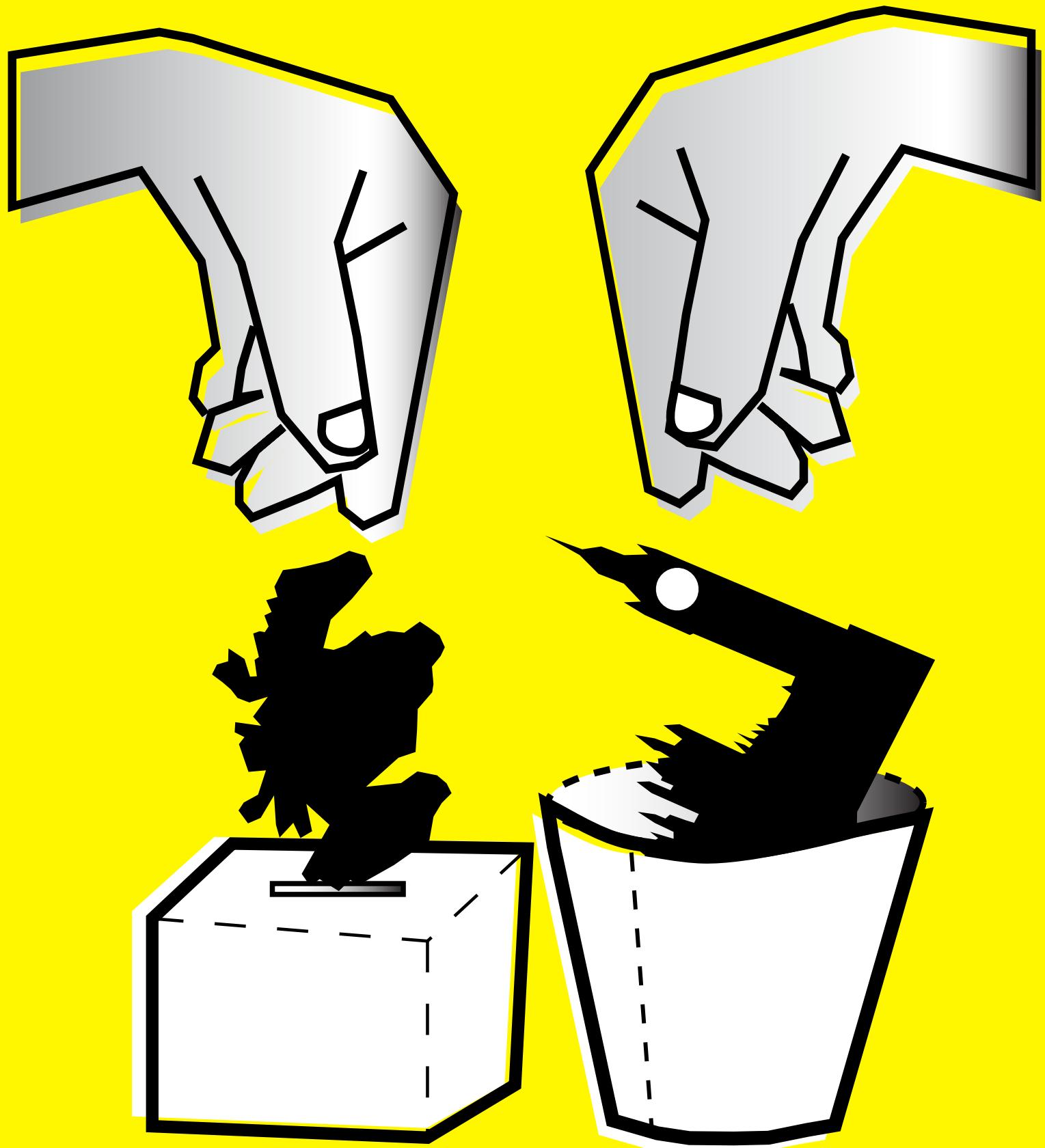


# Scottish Left Review

Issue 64 May/June 2011 £2.00



IT'S ALL ABOUT SCOTLAND NOW...

# Scottish Left Review

Issue 64 May/June 2011

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## Comment

Well, that certainly caught the attention... Nobody who watches UK politics is in any doubt that something just happened. But what?

Before we begin let's just set some scope. There are so many questions to be answered in Scotland now - what is the SNP for? What is Labour for? Where does the constitutional debate go next? How much of an opportunity is this for the left? And what strategy does open up for the left? And these questions will be the subject of the next issue.

This is written only a few days after the result and everything continues to move at a remarkable pace. So it is certainly too early to be confident about providing many definitive answers. But since that doesn't usually stop many of our politics-watchers and 'commentariat' it is telling that we don't really have a settled, established sense of what the Scottish Elections results are telling us and why they happened. Bluntly, UK politics is startled and Scottish politics is utterly disorientated. It is going to take some time to properly understand the 2011 election.

Let's quickly dispose of some of the bits which are easier to understand and assess. The SNP campaign was head-and-shoulders above the others both in terms of analysis, strategy, messaging and organisation. The SNP had a heavyweight leader which none of the others (bar possibly the Tories) could claim. The Labour team was poor and has been for four years and there is boundless evidence that Labour simply refused to accept that anything important or different happened in 2007 (the General Election result turned denial into personal certainty). The positive message of the SNP was also the only one on offer and so probably had a motivational effect for voters. The Lib Dems didn't stand a chance as a result of Westminster compromise and the Tories are a pretty marginal party in Scotland. And finally the electoral system can be capricious when it comes to smaller parties and especially if the big parties get their strategy right (the Tories and the SNP really went after second votes, and the SNP in particular appears to have secured a lot of both-vote wins).

Quality, positivity, competence, astuteness and personality versus denial and misguided confidence going head-to-

## Just days after a watershed election many observers are struggling to understand what happened. Perhaps they need to learn about Scottish politics.

head in a two-horse race are the obvious answers to the ‘Scottish Question’. But they are simply not sufficient to explain what has happened. Because there is another big loser in this election – and that is the aforementioned comentariat. If their full-time job is to watch Scottish politics and analyse what is happening, how did they utterly fail to see what was happening? The answer is that there are at least three major mistakes that have dominated the understanding of Scottish politics in the election campaign, but perhaps more importantly over the last four years of comment by many of the political professionals:

- They simply didn’t understand the nature of the ‘national question’, seeing it only in the terms set out by unionist parties.
- Time and again they seemed unwilling to accept that ‘ideological affinity’ or interest in policy played a significant role in Scottish elections.
- The structures of representative politics make it very difficult for many political professionals to see the field of play through anything other than the prism of political parties.

For more than a decade the Scottish Left Review has been arguing that we are seeing a specific ideological element in Scottish politics that has defined devolution – that a broadly left-of-centre consensus has interacted with a more specific left-focussed strand of the electorate and that this has generated continuing change in Scottish politics which underlies the visible politics of parliament and party. There is plenty to suggest that 2011 is part continuation, part acceleration of this process. So let’s have a look at these issues.

### BADLY IMAGINED COMMUNITY

One of the best-known theorists of nationalism and the nation state (Benedict Anderson) described nations as ‘imagined communities’. Since there is no real personal connection between most of the citizens in large nations they are held together by a shared belief that they are in some way part of a connected entity, an ‘imagined community’. Well, it now looks like those who were trying to describe the ‘community’ that is Scotland

imagined it rather badly.

In some ways this is not surprising. One of the big problems with parliaments and voting is that they are binary – yes/no, this/that, us/them. And this tends to make us think in binary ways when in fact people do not really think in binary terms at all. The overwhelming story about Scotland’s relationship to the UK has been built on one, tiny, binary measure of opinion poll results on who would say ‘yes’ to ‘do you want independence?’.

And because only a third or so ever say ‘yes’ that ‘meant’ that a political-unionist analysis is correct. So it is

that we have heard with crushing and universal repetition that ‘independence isn’t an issue’ and ‘the people don’t want more constitutional debate’ and so on.

But this narrative has been placed in a bubble. Over the same time period it is accepted that more-or-less everyone in Britain has lost at least some degree of faith in Westminster politics. So we have two stories; in one Scotland is entirely committed to Westminster, in the other everyone is losing a commitment to Westminster. That there has been very little cross-fertilisation between these stories has led to a sort of constitutional blindness. The possibility that (for example) Scotland might want to retain affinity connections with the UK and feel nervous about full separation but be disillusioned with Westminster and to reclaim as much of the decision-making as possible to Scotland was barely discussed. The three unionist parties did not even think this was an issue with which to bother ‘ordinary’ Scots, agreeing between themselves that the minor tweaks of the Scotland Bill was the ‘settled will’ of the Scottish people.

It would be easy just to argue ‘and it looks like they got their answer’, but we should perhaps be careful about reading too much into this one way or the other

just yet. Since the SNP deliberately insulated the issue of independence by promising a specific referendum it would be wrong to claim that the vote for the SNP definitely marks a watershed

in attitudes to independence. But it certainly suggests that the political classes have got it wrong in their assumptions about the relationship between the Scottish people and Westminster. And there is one more important point here – the campaign for the union has been in full swing for years and every scare story possible has been deployed since 1999. And yet there has been almost no campaign

for independence. Of course the SNP has made a positive case in favour, but it has shunted the question off into a referendum because it didn’t want to be painted into the corner of having to fight constitutional questions all the time. What happens to Scottish opinion if there is a vibrant Yes campaign? It has already been noted by many that it isn’t really clear what the vision of the No campaign is.

Something has changed, that seems certain. And it hasn’t been driven by love of Westminster or of Westminster politics. It may be that the constitution isn’t quite the marginal issue the professionals thought it was. But what is certain is that the binary story we have been fed for ten years is over. Scotland’s relationship to the UK now appears to be much more complex than the simple slogans we’ve heard.

### THE STORY: HOW THE LEFT LEFT THE LEFT

But while the UK looking at Scotland is bound to see this in constitutional terms, it is almost certainly not the biggest factor. Indeed, the question of the relationship between Scotland and the UK is more likely to be a symptom than the primary cause of political change in

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Scotland. To understand this it is worth revisiting the analysis the SLR has put forward in the past.

We have had four elections in devolved Scotland and each of them has seen markedly different voting behaviours. In 1999 the vote for the Scottish Parliament was probably not particularly different than for a Westminster election, with the outcome being a function of the new voting system. Labour got its solid core vote, the SNP did the same, as did the Tories and the Lib Dems, with a couple of new entries who would have had little chance at Westminster (SSP, Green, an independent). OK. But in 2003 things changed. This had been a period in which the left was at the peak of its disillusionment with Labour (the middle of the Iraq war) and the left of the Labour Party vote realised that it could go elsewhere (a good number having already moved in 1999). The SNP had tacked to the right under John Swinney and so most of the vote moved straight to the SSP and the Greens (and a couple of others).

So as most of the vote remained static, the left vote delivered a Rainbow Parliament.

(At this point it is worth tracking the Lib Dems. At the time this did not seem as significant because it was more generally accepted that the Lib Dem vote was a liberal-left vote.

The Lib Dems in the first Holyrood Coalition were seen to have dragged the Labour Party to the left and at the UK level the Lib Dems were fighting the Iraq War and the civil liberties infringements of Labour. There was very little doubt then that the Lib Dems in the UK had absorbed a reasonable chunk of disillusioned left-liberal Labour voters and readers in Scotland will know of liberal left Labour voters who didn't feel they could go to the too-radical SSP or the two-nationalist

SNP.)

However, while in the 2003-2007 Parliament there was much visibility of Green/SSP MSPs, given a Labour/LibDem coalition with a clear majority it didn't actually make all that much difference. After Henry McLeish's experiments with a more radical Scottish Labour agenda, Jack McConnell dragged the party back to a more cautious position slightly to the right and the radicals made little difference. And of course there was the implosion of the SSP. So by 2007 there was another realignment of the left voter. This time the SSP and Green vote moved significantly towards the SNP which had, under Alex Salmond, repositioned itself clearly to the left of Labour on most issues (though with a clear neoliberal bent to its economic policies). By 2007 it is patronising to call these moving voters 'disillusioned Labour' – they are really Scotland's 'unaligned left'. And here they chose to change the old order. And they did. (Meanwhile, the Lib Dems appeared to continue to hold the left-liberal vote.)

So we have seen a sequence of Parliaments in which you can reasonably argue that there was a solid core for the four main parties and a vote coming from the left of all of them which had tried a number of tactics to change Scottish politics. It tried smaller parties but discovered that if this just left 'the same coalition' in

power then it hadn't worked. So it moved to the SNP in some hope of change and broadly seems to have been satisfied.

Which is where the next major change takes place. The Lib Dem voters in Scotland almost certainly remained to the left of Labour on many policies and indeed in the UK General Election quite a number of figures on the left openly voted Lib Dem. And then they went into coalition with the Tories. This was bound to cause them serious problems

everywhere, but particularly in anti-Tory Scotland. And it did. But it is highly patronising to this shifting Lib Dem vote to treat it as if it has no political interest, as has been implied by some slightly facile comments on why it went SNP rather than Labour. The answer to the question is fairly straightforward – it is largely a liberal-left vote and it moved to the next most liberal-left party. And that wasn't the Labour Party. There are three big bell-weather issues which ought to have made this no surprise. Many Lib Dems are professional, public sector workers. Which is exactly the kind of person to whom minimum pricing for alcohol is a winning issue. They are by definition 'liberal' and many of them must have been at least sympathetic to the compassionate release of Megrahi. And certainly the 'lock 'em up' madness of Richard Baker and the Labour campaign is anathema to that kind of social liberal. Why on earth would a Lib Dem who made that choice on the basis of social democratic left-leaning liberalism abandon that party when it lost its way in favour of a right-wing populist crime agenda and the cynical, populist pro-cheap-booze agenda of Labour?

So here is a workable thesis: Scotland has four shades of left and one shade of right. The right always votes Tory, returning slight variations on the same block. And despite the assumptions and will of many commentators, the right-of-centre vote in Scotland is static, small and therefore of marginal interest to the big questions of Scottish politics. Then there is a solid block which is clearly socially democratic in nature and finds its allegiance predicated on party – a chunk which is culturally Labour and a chunk which is culturally nationalist. Neither is very different from the other and (with caution) it is possible to suggest that they are not particularly analytical in policy terms – even if there was much to tell between Labour and the SNP in policy. Then there is a strand which does take an interest in policy and is particularly committed to change, a more radical left group which has moved around. And then there is another group interested in policy but with a more liberal-left (rather than radical-left)

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agenda.

Now this is of course a simplification and it is unsafe to suggest that all Lib Dem voters are 'non-aligned liberal left' since there are plenty 'cultural Lib Dems'. But it helps to explain things in a comprehensible way. There is a desire for change in Scotland which has become wider and increasingly less cautious. That desire found no home in Labour and so has been on the move. It found that a Rainbow Parliament without fundamental change at the top didn't work so it produced change at the top. And having seen that work it kept going. The party with the strongest combination of left/change agenda and likelihood of power has simply hoovered up more and more strands of vote. It has had its 'cultural affinity' voters from the start. Then it picked up much of the more radical left. Then it picked up much of the liberal left. And that – in Scotland – represents three of the five decisive strands of vote. The Tories got the right, Labour got the cultural Labour vote, the SNP swept the rest.

What is interesting about this is that there is plenty to suggest that

the electorate is if anything moving to the left, but it also suggests that they are trailing The Left (capitalised, the traditional 'organised left' – which is to say 'many of you') behind. The organised trade union movement in Scotland has simply had no influence and very little voice. The left parties have gone out of their way to give no-one a reason to vote for them. The Greens discovered a radical left agenda, but sadly only half-way through the election, having played footsie quite publicly with Labour beforehand. Campaigning groups have had little to do with the election campaign. The Scottish electorate is still to the left of its parties, but it has simply had to make a space for itself because no real space has been made for it.

Now, this analysis has been ignored for a decade and will very probably be ignored again. The orthodoxy among the comentariat is that ideology isn't really an important part of politics any more. It debates what does 'left' and 'right' mean any more. It often doubts whether it is possible to even make an assessment of who is to the left of whom. It understands process,

personality and professional politics. It gets how parties work, it has an undue admiration for what it defines as 'Good Politicians', it has the phone numbers of hosts of strategists and hacks. But it (surprisingly) refuses (with a number of honourable exceptions) to open its mind to the possibility that there is a debate over ideology and policy. So this is pro-Salmond, anti-Labour, an accident of a good/bad campaign and so on.

But this will no longer do. If it was OK to treat Scottish politics as a series of events and never a process, that has to change. If we are to understand politics in Scotland there needs to be some effort to find a story which explains ten years and not just ten minutes. 'Disillusionment' – the negative story – only takes us so far. Do Scottish voters make a choice or do they just select? Well, everyone accepts that there appears to be a remarkable sophistication among those who vote in Scotland and there seems little reason to believe that any of the outcomes they have achieved in four elections are seen as a 'mistake' by voters. So we must assume that what they are getting is something like what they are asking for. Which means we need to listen to what they are asking for and try and understand that better.

The left still dominates Scottish politics and it is still deciding the outcome of our elections. It is strange that The Left as an entity has if anything got weaker.

## THE END OF PARTIES

So, if we can explain this election in part in terms of how Scotland sees itself in relation to the politics of Westminster and in part as an accumulation of different strands of left voter (as well as the accepted issues of quality of campaign, strength of leadership and so on), there has to be an issue of the nature of the parties themselves.

Well, yes and no. Undoubtedly there is much to tell us in the state of the parties about how they went about the business of vision, policy and campaign. And certainly it would be wrong to over-claim the death of the cultural affinity between many Scottish voters and Labour (in particular). But it certainly looks much more like this is about the



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ending of the parties as we know them. All of the parties in Scotland have been thrown upside-down by this election and they all need to figure out where they are and what they're for – not least the SNP.

But perhaps more than this we have seen an election in Scotland where party affinity did not decide the outcome and the many people (especially around Labour and the Lib Dems) who saw this election in terms of party were wrong. Shifting party allegiance in Scotland might once have been unthinkable, but now it is routine. In a bizarre way, the more sectarian have become the parties, the less sectarian the electorate. This hasn't been about party but about direction and change. The SNP has been the primary beneficiary, not because they are 'the SNP' but because they seemed to offer the best variety of change.

The SNP had a positive vision, a well-thought-through campaign, a strong leader and team and a professional operation generally. It really led the policy agenda with Labour following in behind its more popular social policies (Council Tax freeze, free university education etc.). But it also moderated its traditionally more neoliberal tone on the economy – no longer the 'Arc of Prosperity' (a neoliberal fantasy

world) but rather 'reindustrialisation'. It lead through ideas and message but most people probably still accept that many people who voted SNP would not consider themselves 'SNP voters'. Need the party worry? Not if it accepts this role. Salmond has talked about 'a national party' representing Scotland rather than factions of it. If he can pull that off – sort of dissolving the SNP identity as a protagonist to become a kind of national lobby group – then he could see the SNP in power for a generation. Weakening the party to strengthen it might actually work.

The Labour Party meanwhile is simply nowhere. It is hard to find the words to really capture how dismal Labour in Scotland has become. It is remarkable how far from the perceptions of others has become the Labour perception of itself. Many in the Party really, really didn't believe they actually lost in 2007 (seeing it as a draw, and a temporary blip). They seemed to think they just had to tough it out for four years and keep insulting the SNP to get back in power. They think they were performing OK (apparently they believe they won all the 'intellectual arguments' in Parliament over the last four years, which will be of great surprise to most

intellectuals who in fact found the Party virtually brain dead). They saw a historical vision of Scotland, one made up of the iconography of the 1980s and the dominance of the pre- and post-devolution years, and expected that 'natural centre of gravity' to pull everything back together again. And they saw good results in some by-elections and a strong General Election showing as evidence.

But they abandoned almost everything else. Scottish Labour has been little short of contemptuous of all but the 'culturally Labour' strand of the left in Scotland. Ex-supporters who had left them as the party drifted to the right were just 'Trots' or 'the looney left'. They were simply abandoned like unnecessary flotsam. Then they did almost nothing to attract the middle-class, educated left. Their stance on a number of issues like minimum alcohol pricing, knife crime and Megrahi was all targeted ruthlessly at what they saw as working-class populism. These positions were all basically right-wing, and they were happy to mock the squealing of the socially democratic middle classes. They seemed utterly disinterested in how this would play with public sector professionals (surely the whole of the NHS staff must have been horrified at the position on alcohol pricing). They could not have cared less about the attitudes of those interested in a left-liberal civil liberties agenda. They even thought very seriously about playing the class card on university education ('make those middle classes pay for their privileges') before panicking at the last minute.

Labour had no vision, it was all dog-whistles to its own people. Not enough people understand the meaning of 'Populism' (with a capital P). Populism means something like "...pits a virtuous and homogeneous people against a set of elites and dangerous 'others' who are together depicted as depriving (or attempting to deprive) the sovereign people of their rights, values, prosperity, identity and voice" (from *Twenty-First Century Populism* by Daniele Albertazzi and Duncan McDonnell). Populism is best understood as a sort-of rabble-rousing of the many against the few. This is very different from being popular, and

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this language got utterly confused in the campaign. So freezing the Council Tax may be ‘popular’ but it is not ‘Populist’ – it’s not an ‘us against them’ sort of thing. But making people afraid of knife crime (‘us’) and promising to do bad things to those caught with knives (‘them’) is Populist (but, it turns out, not all that popular). Labour shot straight and unashamedly for some of the more unpleasant sentiments it thought it identified among ‘its people’. And failed badly.

Labour thought that The Party was strong enough to take them through the election. But it turned out that the Labour Party in itself doesn’t matter, just like the SNP in itself didn’t really matter. It really seems to have been the ideas, the vision which mattered. And that in turn suggests that there is no reason to believe that Scotland necessarily needs Labour any more. Impossible as it is to imagine even today, unless Labour can find a reason to exist beyond simply existing, it is possible to imagine it not existing.

And briefly, the other parties. The Tories, as has been discussed, are what they are and are where they are. Many Tory activists somehow believe that if they could just be a bit more strident, right-wing and pinstriped they would make the breakthrough they deserve. But that is simply a fantasy. Had it not been for Annabelle Goldie’s ability to put a human face on the Tories it would have been worse. The Tories are simply a marginal force in Scotland. The Lib Dems have their own problems and the Clegg Effect has much to do with it. But the Scottish Lib Dems did plenty harm to themselves all on their own. They behaved for much of the last Parliament as if they were still an adjunct to the Labour Party. The outright rejection of working with the SNP was a mistake. Leaving the Tories to look like the one party that would try to be constructive in Parliament was a mistake. The rabid unionism was a mistake (why not reach out a bit to a change agenda, given they are a federal party?). And the sheer opportunistic behaviour was a mistake – if the ferocity of their stance on Megrahi was hard to fully understand coming from liberals, the minimum pricing stance was absolutely inexplicable. Of

course, Nicol Stephen and Tavish Scott were really quite apolitical and really quite conservative and many of their voters lay to their left. So the collapse is not much of a surprise, and ‘it’s all Nick’s fault’ is short of the mark.

The left parties are all over the place. The state of current relations between the SSP and Solidarity is an embarrassment to all on the left – we should take out a defamation suit against them both for the harm they have done the ‘brand’ of socialism in Scotland. They have made it easy to claim the left collapsed exactly in one of the most left-leaning elections in recent British history. And given what we currently hear from both, there seems little point in waiting for them to form something worth calling a party. And the bluff appears to have been called on George Galloway’s constantly shifting positioning (backing Iain Gray was not a great idea).

Which leaves the biggest disappointment being the performance of the Greens. Frankly, many (including many Greens) were disappointed at a lack of radicalism from the Greens over the last four years. It seemed to be the strategy to keep their heads down, take no chances, make no mistakes and hope to pick up more seats through the list vote. They seemed to many to pick the wrong fights and to take action like voting down the budget on what seemed like some fairly marginal grounds (reasonable as the case might have been in these areas). And then, for a number of weeks leading up to the election, they seemed to campaign primarily on being part of a Labour coalition – which was hardly an inspiring prospectus. Which is why it felt like such a missed opportunity when we saw their manifesto. If they had something this positive and clear worth voting for, what have they been doing for four years? Is there too big a gap between the ‘head’ of the Greens and the ‘voice’ of the Greens? Many hoped for a Green/SNP coalition. If they could have got some of their manifesto enacted that would perhaps have been the best possible outcome. So why four wasted years?

In no case did party really matter (other than perhaps the Tories). Vision, direction and message mattered. But the

professional political classes no longer understand these things. They can only see through ‘party eyes’. But political sectarianism in Scotland may well be in steep decline.

## STARTING FROM HERE

So here we are. This is a remarkable time in Scottish politics. In the next issue of the Scottish Left Review we will look at what this means for delivering a left agenda in Scotland. Some will think there has never been a better time, some will feel that initiative has been lost. Some who should be on the left will be looking inwards, others will be disillusioned, others elated. Some will fear distractions of constitutional debate while others will hope for greater distance from toxic Westminster politics. Some will fear the cult of the personality, others will be glad to hear a strong Scottish voice. But whatever your snap reaction, be calm-headed and look forward with confidence. At least the Westminster way has been not only rejected but discredited in Scotland. Westminster politics is dead. Perhaps only now will we see what devolution really means.

Until we do, and if this analysis is right, there are three lessons the Scottish left must learn if it has not already:

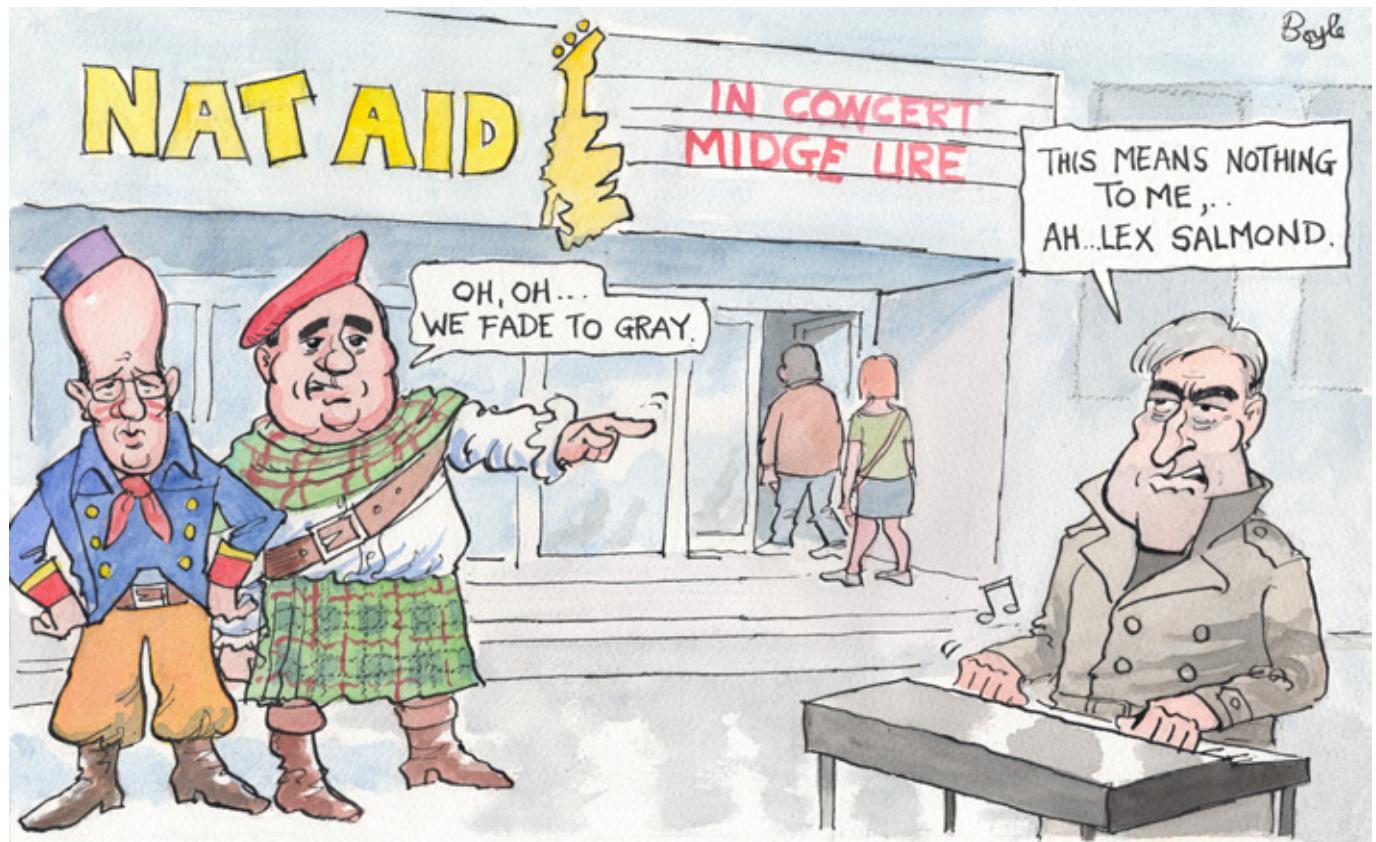
- There is a mood for change in Scotland and there seems to be more confidence in Scotland to find solutions for itself than from looking south for them. This may or may not mean support for independence, but it does mean that people are looking to home for their answers.
- Scottish politics is utterly defined by different strands of left vote. Winning Scotland means winning over as much of that left-of-centre vote as possible.
- Party does not matter any more. People have voted against cultural party allegiance in favour of vision and ideas.

Uniting left thinking, finding new answers for Scotland, putting vision ahead of party. Surely there is at least something in this to unite us? ■

# Boyle on the Election



Regular Scottish Left Review contributor cartoonist Frank Boyle gives his take on the Scottish election.



# FRANK ABOUT FOOTBALL

The cartoons of Frank Boyle, award-winning cartoonist of the Edinburgh Evening News

A Scottish Football Museum Exhibition

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# Transparent, but not Invisible

In *Who Owns Scotland* Andy Wightman set out in clear and shocking terms how much of Scotland is owned by how few people, and how this has been so for generations. While some of the great land owners are no longer nominally individuals but corporate entities, these are effectively controlled in many cases by family-placed trustees. Scotland; a few hundred of the great and good owning territory occupied by over five million people.

Amending feudal land law and providing some community buy-back rights with a claim on government resources was a step towards change by the coalition over the first two Scottish governments. However the governance of Scotland has been, and to a large extent still is, ‘owned’ by a few of the great and the good. For more than fifty years, who the home grown Great-and-Good were was decided by the Labour party. Since the creation of the Scottish parliament some of that has changed. At a Scottish level this has been as a result of a more proportionally elected chamber, and subsequently as a result of proportionality in local government which Labour was forced to accept.

Sadly, ‘feudal’ thinking about government in Scotland, that the Great-and-the-Good (here branded GGs) shall rule unelected and therefore by patronage, has not fundamentally changed. The ‘natural habitat’ of the GGs, that pool from which they are selected, now more readily includes some of the SNP. A change of personnel after so long is probably beneficial for its own sake, but those concerned with social democracy should be keen to see change not only in the name on the box of privileged access but also in the structure of the governance of privilege.

It is fully accepted here that there is a balance to be struck between popular accountability and populism. Despite the inherent biases in our system of legal appointment, many in the UK would argue against directly electing senior judges. A balance needs to be struck between high levels of technical expertise and electoral accountability; however there is a problem in civil society when so many important organisations are ‘overseen’ by appointees.

The difference between an officer appointed to either the civil service or local government, and those that head many structures that intermesh and control Scotland is that for the civil service/council position the criteria for selection and the process of appointment is regulated by rules applied to all posts of the same level by (in most cases) independent officers of the state. The rules of selection are relatively easy to understand and - in principle - to amend.

The problem is not necessarily one of absolute ability. Many of the GGs might be appropriate people were the “jobs” actually to be advertised and the posts filled by application to (say) a quality HR department, but they have no claim to democratic legitimacy, and no necessary claim to technical competence. In practice - with a mixture of the usual suspects and patronage - a cadre of people who have done ‘this sort of thing before’ is built up and drawn from.

Then there are the non-jobs. These are devised in order to provide an apparently worthy income for people it would otherwise be inconvenient to have hanging around. Individuals are thus added to boards who cannot, or do not, and are often not expected to, effectively oversee. They add to the number but not the weight. The sheer number of individuals on boards is sometimes used as a proxy for representation – given the process of selection and the incentives provided to selectors to choose quiescent or ‘reasonable’ people – this ‘citizen jury’ claim is false.

At a Scotland-wide level, on these sorts of Non-Departmental Public Body (NDPB), a very few people chose the heads, the board, the chief executive. To take one example, there is a charity (Glasgow Life) which now controls the museums and many of the halls and swimming pools that Glasgow City

Council once ran. It also defines library delivery, sport provision and music opportunity in Glasgow. It negotiates with the Council about the services it provides in return for the cash the local authority will pay. It gets a tax advantage for not being a local government organisation. One of the central problems with all of this is that few

Glaswegians will easily understand or in any way affect either its structure or its controlling membership. On the CSG board (in August 2010) sat: six councillors plus: The Rt Hon George Reid, The Rt Hon Lord Macfarlane of Bearsden KT, Sir Angus Grossart, Mel Young, and Dr Bridget McConnell.

Now all of these are fine people (some are titled people) but none were elected to these important jobs. Even the councillors were not elected as directors. It needs remembering that directors of boards or trustees of charities have different responsibilities and accountabilities in law to those required of elected councillors. Glasgow Life is perhaps the most diverse and visible of the non-Glasgow Council bodies that run Glasgow Council functions; however another - CORDIA - runs the most vital care services in the city but even with five councillors on the board it is not a part of the Council. Nor is there an enforced political balance on ALEO councillor appointments, which given that commercial confidentiality can prohibit oversight, reduces transparency to fog.

What should be the democratic response? There are several actions which might be taken and attitudes which could be changed:

## CUT OR AMALGAMATE

The first of these is always attempted by incoming administrations – question whether we need this number of bodies and attempt to cut and/or amalgamate or bring the job back to a general elected body. A bonfire of the ALOs/Qangos has

**Sadly, ‘feudal’ thinking about government in Scotland, that the Great-and-the-Good shall rule unelected and therefore by patronage, has not fundamentally changed**

# The ‘selectorate’ – the great-and-good appointed to oversee public functions on our behalf – needs reform. Paul Coleshill puts forward some suggestions to improve transparency.

been promised for as long as anyone can remember. Some come, some go, but it will take a self denying ordinance on the part of central government to forgo and (for the minister) the - faint possibility - of government policy actually being delivered by the appointees, or at least the action headline.

## NO ‘CONTRACTING OUT’

To make any of this stick at both local and national level - a general principle of the non commutation of powers should be adopted – and only breached exceptionally. If people are elected to bodies with wide powers and responsibilities it should in general not be possible to ‘sub-contract’ those powers to a body with non elected decision makers whose work cannot be directly controlled or overseen by the parent body.

## LEVEL PLAYING FIELD

There is no Scottish wide public policy reason for the existence of the majority of local government ALEOs. The understandable local reason is to circumvent tax- or capital-raising rules applied to the parent body, and to enable extra councillor remuneration. If a Council could raise capital against well-audited commercial activity, and set a visible remuneration level for senior councillors, and above all get absurd tax penalties dealt with - there would be little incentive to set up local ALEOs. Prudential borrowing properly conceived, the right number of allowed senior councillor posts and scrapping nationally collected business rates applied to local government owned property and/or getting charity tax status for activities otherwise deemed ‘charitable’ by the relevant body, would balance incentives.

## OPEN/TRANSPARENT/FAIRLY SHARED

There is a depressing sameness to the individuals asked to sit on boards. This is true of the private sector and commercial companies. It should not be true of public bodies. There should be an aim to widen the ‘pool’ from which members are drawn, and to

train this wider ‘selectorate’ to assist representation and wider civil society. One small but practical way to achieve this might be to place a limit on multiple membership of these sorts of body and also on serial membership. In addition, each member of the board should be required to submit an individual report evaluating how they have contributed to the workings and aims of the board in the last year to be added to a corporate report. Whatever structure the professional (largely unelected) organisations take – all meetings should be open, all decisions challengeable, possibly by structured appeal to the originating body – council or government department. The secrecy of “commercial confidentiality” should not be applied to their internal affairs, and should be kept to a (legally challengeable) minimum when dealing with private individuals or private companies.

## LOCAL – ELECTED

If there is - what has been termed - a democratic deficit, why not directly elect people to these sorts of boards? Unfortunately a direct election to a high level board is not usually a viable solution

for a number of reasons, mainly because few want to take part in the types of board on offer and few bother to vote for them. They might reasonably suspect they would have no very profound input

and the time and trouble to become informed enough to contribute to one of these bodies tends to favour those who either worked in the controlled area for a living or have been on one of these sorts of body before. The non professionals, whilst nominally in charge might discover that they are not expected to contribute but rather to supinely agree to the professional advice.

## LOCALISM

We need grass roots up empowerment; people must be motivated to take part. If the change happens relatively quickly some people are keen to take “decisions that directly change their immediate surroundings”. Westminster-appointed

bodies need to cede power and resources to Holyrood and they in turn to local councils and they in turn to geographically small but general local bodies. One solution to the lack of general electoral interest in getting elected to arms length bodies would be to attempt to reformulate the basis of their existence (and operation) from topic specific (largely theoretical) control over a wide geographical area to general control of a local area. In a sense this reinvents very local councils; local burghs or community councils with powers. They could then operate the way most people would want community planning to work - with representatives actually chosen by the community in a transparent way.

With geographically small but generally competent bodies there are problems of scale. The more local an organisation the more there is replication and a need for costly communication with other similar bodies sharing physical or functional boundaries. These are real problems, but co-ops of shared institutional resources are working right now. Joint police/ fire boards, joint buying entities, joint pension fund arrangements, and community resource centres are all examples – admittedly not without their own problems.

The GGs will tell us that there is no need for all this fuss – that they have ever had the best interests of the rest of us at heart. Those who appoint and dismiss the current crop of committee people will tell us that all is ultimately under their control and the theoretical control (or at least oversight) of elected individuals. So all is (ultimately) democratic or (at the very least) legitimate.

If we believe them absolutely – we need do nothing. If we rather think that there is a massive disenfranchisement at the core of appointed government, then a “bonfire of the (Qango/Aleo/NDPB)s” appears necessary but (it has been argued here) is not a sufficient solution. History shows they rise again. A change in the mind set of governance is needed. Perhaps we should set up a NDPB to oversee the change?

*Paul Coleshill is Councillor for Langside, leader of the Liberal Democrats in Glasgow City council and formerly an economics lecturer*

# A Way Forward for Workers

When Len McCluskey the new General Secretary of Unite addressed the assembled crowds at Glasgow's May Day Rally just days before the Scottish Parliament elections he delivered a stark message to the Scottish Labour party.

Reminding us that Keir Hardy had said his key aim in life was to stir up divine discontent among the people, he strongly urged Scottish Labour to return to those radical roots - to reclaim its radical edge and reject the cuts agenda. He said it was no use embracing the concept of cuts but saying we'll cut slower or thinner. He said it was time for the Party to face up to the fact that the New Labour philosophy – that slavish ideology of neo-liberalism – has failed and he urged us all to stand up and be confident in our beliefs. For us to have faith in our values of decency, dignity, justice and equality.

Len McCluskey also underlined Unite's absolute backing for the People's Charter, saying there is an alternative out there. An alternative called the People's Charter, which is all about investing in our communities and not destroying them.

Only a few days later, having witnessed the SNP sweep to an unprecedented majority in the Scottish Parliament elections, I am left wishing that Labour in Scotland had heeded my General Secretary's advice, ripped up their manifesto and adopted the People's Charter instead. The SNP promoted a strong, radical vision around renewables which they articulated with passion. In doing this they portrayed a message of confidence and hope to the Scottish people, inspiring them to support the party in great numbers.

What a pity Labour didn't show

the same courage of conviction in its message. With a manifesto that made cautious noises about the living wage, jobs and growth but failed to articulate how we could say no to the cuts killing our communities, protect our services or increase Scotland's fiscal powers and use them to create greater tax justice, Labour came across as a party that had lost its way, and had no confidence in Scotland's ability to do things better. No wonder Labour's leadership didn't seem able to get passionate about their message.

For me, it seems that because

Labour has lost belief in its own values that people just don't understand what Labour's message is anymore. Work will most certainly need to be done to rebuild the party in Scotland now and a full review has been promised by the outgoing leader. Indeed perhaps the very scale of this massive defeat for Labour in Scotland will ironically give it the opportunity it so desperately needs to reclaim its radical roots.

Unite in Scotland

will certainly be working hard to ensure Labour rebuilds in a more progressive and confident direction.

But as we look ahead to dealing with a strong SNP administration, the labour movement needs more than ever to spread and articulate our own message, both to the new government and to the people of Scotland. We can't just sit back and wait for the Labour Party to sort itself out. We should be leading the policy agenda.

I believe that in the period ahead the People's Charter should become the manifesto for our movement. There has never been a better or more important time for the unions in Scotland to get behind it and promote it. It has the power to unite the left across party

boundaries behind a positive agenda that is set out in terms all can understand and it neatly encapsulates "The Better Way". It is an agenda for radical change that few would disagree with. Indeed it reaches out to people across our communities.

What the People's Charter calls for:

## A FAIR ECONOMY FOR A FAIRER BRITAIN

- Progressive taxes without loopholes or tax havens
- Nationalised ownership of the main banks
- Government guarantee for all pensions, mortgages and savings
- Tie pensions and benefits to wages
- Give pensioners free transport and heating
- Increase the minimum wage

## MORE AND BETTER JOBS

- Protect existing jobs
- Make a massive investment in new jobs
- Develop green technology for our children's sake

## DECENT HOMES FOR ALL

- Create three million new publicly owned homes in UK
- Control rents and stop the repossession

## SAVE AND IMPROVE OUR SERVICES

- All key public services to be publicly owned
- Keep the post in public ownership
- Remove profit making from NHS and Education
- Stop the attacks on our public sector staff
- No cuts to services for our most vulnerable

## FOR FAIRNESS & JUSTICE

- Equality for all
- Standing together against racism and discrimination
- End Child Poverty & give our young people a future
- Free childcare, youth facilities, education and training for all
- Repeal the anti-union laws to fight injustice for all workers

## A BETTER FUTURE NOW

- No more blood and money for wars
- Bring our troops home
- No more billions for nuclear weapons

## Roz Foyer argues that the People's Charter offers a way forward for the labour movement in Scotland and offers a policy agenda that can unite people from across political parties

- Cancel third world debt
- Get rid of Britain's own debt economy

My own union Unite, following on from a long, drawn-out merger process and having only recently completed both General Secretary and National Executive Council elections, at last now has a clear and stable political direction, which I'm pleased to say proudly supports the aims of the People's Charter. This means that Unite in Scotland is now able to be far more proactive in promoting the Charter. Indeed my colleague Jackson Cullinane, the Political Officer for Unite in Scotland has now formally joined the Scottish Committee of the People's Charter so that Unite can play a key role in the campaign going forward.

Unite supported the work done before the election to ask all Labour candidates to publicly sign up to the Charter and it should be noted that those who got behind the Charter in a big way

were successful at the polls. Elaine Smith Labour MSP is a good example. Not only did she promote the Charter as part of her election campaign but she had also been out before the election period kicked off promoting the Charter and collecting thousands of signatures in Coatbridge High Street for several months. It is significant to note that Elaine is one of the few Labour MSPs in Lanarkshire that survived the SNP landslide; indeed she actually increased her share of the vote by 4.5 per cent to 52.2 per cent.

The next steps for promoting the Charter include lodging it as a formal petition to the Scottish Parliament's Petitions Committee, or at least those aspects of the Charter that can be delivered within the Parliament's devolved powers. As part of this initiative Unite plan to promote sign up to the charter by our wider membership in Scotland through our branches, and more directly through our email and text contacts.

Unite is also keen to explore how

we could use the charter as a vehicle for building up campaigning links with local community groups which are fighting the cuts and we will be looking at how we can support the work of local Trades Councils across Scotland to take the charter out on the streets. We are also exploring the role that new media can play in allowing us to get positive messages like the People's Charter out to our members that the mainstream media is unwilling to help us deliver.

There is still a big job for the movement to do in Scotland both in developing working people's political conscience and their confidence that things can and will change if they take action. For me the People's Charter gives us the manifesto we need to inspire people, and god knows there has never been a better time to stir up people's divine discontent. So let's get the Charter out there and start engaging our people. ■

**Roz Foyer** is the Senior Regional Organiser for Unite in Scotland.

Austerity, resistance, alternatives...

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# Unity Offers No Way Forward

Gordon Morgan's appeal for Left Unity ahead of the Scottish parliamentary elections and beyond (SLR issue 63) while certainly well-meaning fails to address key issues which must be the foundation stone of any future unity. Before starting this article I was determined not to mention the Tommy Sheridan case and its impact on the Left but instead will limit myself to one basic comment. History now appears to be in the process of being re-written with the SSP cast in the role as villain. Nothing could be further from the truth. The SSP were not the villains of this sorry saga: they were the victims. Responsibility for what happened and for the damage done to the Scottish Left lies entirely with the reckless and self-centred actions of one individual. The SSP's conflict with Tommy Sheridan was not about his personal life. Opinions on this within the SSP varied from finding his behaviour unacceptable for a leader of a socialist party and an elected politician to viewing it as an essentially private matter. Instead it centred on the fact that Tommy Sheridan wanted the party to sign up to a version of events which he knew were false, we knew were false and almost everyone else knew were false. He then wanted leading members of the party to be prepared to perjure themselves in court on his behalf. This on the basis of an action which he took against the News of the World in spite of considerable advice to the contrary and which proved to be extremely misguided.

When the party refused, Tommy organised a split involving a group of people whose main political platform was personal loyalty to the former leader in alliance with two opposition factions (the SWP and the CWI) and formed Solidarity. The SWP, in particular followed Tommy Sheridan not because they particularly supported him but because they felt they could dominate the new party in a way that they failed to do in the SSP. All this because the party took a principled position that it was not prepared to lie to its own members and supporters and to the general public. This is what happened and no amount of spin can alter this basic truth.

Now onto left unity. The SSP was formed as a party of left unity. It remains

so today. Its aim then and now has been the creation of a broad based party of the left around the twin aims of socialism and independence. However, experience shows that unity cannot be simply parachuted in or come about through quick fixes. Such unity rarely lasts and tends to fall apart at the first sign of pressure. Unity has to be built on solid foundations. Experience in the SSP showed

that it was difficult to maintain any kind of unity with factions who were diametrically opposed to key aspects of policy and who viewed their participation in the SSP in purely tactical terms. For unity to work there must be unity of purpose, broad agreement on the basics and mutual respect. Anything short of this is a recipe for disunity and disaster and simply won't work.

Let me give a small example. I chair meetings of the SSP's International Committee. Before the split this committee barely functioned because there was so little agreement among its members on which international causes to support so it ended up doing next to nothing. Since the split the Committee has organised SSP delegations to Cuba, Catalonia, Galicia and the Basque Country. It has received delegations from Pakistan and the Basque Country and organised events around Ireland, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Peru, Palestine and Cuba while building up solid links with other Left organisations around the world. It could only do this because everyone involved was basically united around what we wanted to do.

In his article Gordon Morgan suggests some kind of rapprochement with between the SSP and Solidarity. While never wanting to say never and recognising that there are many good socialists within Solidarity, let me throw a couple of spanners in the works. If the SSP were to pursue such a rapprochement; who exactly in Solidarity or Respect or TUSC or N2EU or whatever it calls itself these days would

we be dealing with? Would it be the Tommy Sheridan Support Group or the SWP or the new breakaway from the SWP or the CWI? We know who we are but who are Solidarity? Just as importantly (and this is my last reference to Tommy Sheridan), before, during and after both trials the SSP was described by people in and around Solidarity as 'unfit for purpose' and even 'a cancer

on the working class movement'. At the same time those people who were dragged through the courts and gave evidence against Tommy Sheridan were variously described as 'scabs', 'scum', 'class traitors', 'agents of the state' and 'hirelings of the Murdoch press'. This directed at well respected socialists who have given and continue to give a lifetime of service to the movement. Is this still the view of Solidarity? If not, then they should issue an immediate and unconditional public apology and accept that they were wrong to slander the SSP and its members in this way. If it is still their view then why on earth would they want to work with such people?

Gordon's vision of left unity could not be shakier or less ambitious. For him it is about stitching together the little fragments of the Left in a kind of short term fix. Why bother? All we would have are little fragments of the Left stitched together. In the meantime Scottish society moves on. We are living through a period of what Naomi Klein called 'Disaster Capitalism' where the ruling class is waging an all-out war against the working class on a scale which we haven't seen for generations. At the same time, significant numbers are being mobilised into action to defend working class interests and fight for an alternative. Evidence of this can be seen in the re-emergence of a radical students movement, the trade union led campaign against the cuts and in a myriad of localised protests such as the occupation of the Hetherington Building at Glasgow University.

## Responding to Gordon Morgan's article in the last issue, Bill Bonnar looks at the potential for realignment of Scotland's left parties and dismisses it as a distraction from building a left movement

A whole new generation is emerging through these struggles. The opportunity for rebuilding the left in Scotland by actively bringing this new generation to socialism has rarely been greater. This should be our priority and this is certainly the case with the SSP. I have been around Left politics long enough not to view things through rose coloured spectacles as I am sure is the case with most of the readers of SLR. Yet the fact remains is that the SSP is re-emerging from the crisis that was inflicted on it. The party has never been more united in its objectives; a unity in part forged by the experiences of recent years. Recruitment is at its highest level since the crisis first broke and overwhelmingly consists of young people for whom even the first Tommy Sheridan trial is distant history. The party is rebuilding its branch and membership base and has the most dynamic socialist youth wing seen in Scotland for a generation. No one else on the Left in Scotland can make this claim. While the fractious mix of small left factions in and around Solidarity constantly try to get the better of each other, the SSP simply gets on with

things. Why would anyone think that being involved with all that represents an attractive proposition?

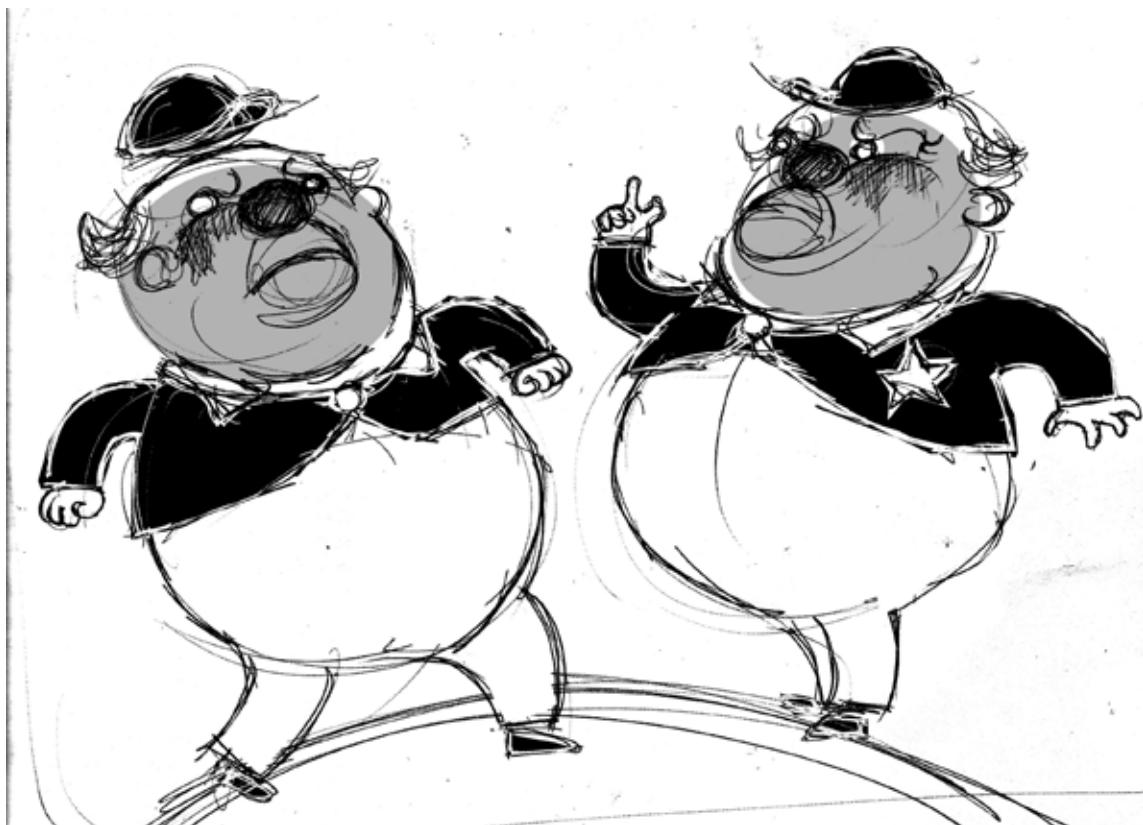
A key part of the thinking behind the original launch of the SSP was that there existed in Scotland a significant minority of people who considered themselves to be on the left. This constituency needed a political vehicle which did not exist through the other parties. The SSP set out to be that vehicle and in showed its potential by gaining six MSPs. That potential constituency is still there even if it has been let down by recent events. All the SSP's objectives revolve around becoming that vehicle once more.

There is no great mystery to building an effective socialist movement. It's about developing Left policies and turning them into what Gramsci called 'the common sense ideas of the age'. Its about developing a vision of what a future socialist society would look like and popularising that vision. Its about getting the basics right in terms of organisation, membership, branches, finance and media profile. It's about having an inclusive and democratic

structure and not one dominated by celebrity leaders. It is also about recognising that unlike the parties of capitalism who are primarily located in an electoral process; we are not. A party of the left must be located in the struggles of working people, be that in the workplace, local community or around specific issues. If we are successful there the electoral work will tend to take care of itself. It is not rocket science. This has always been the case throughout the entire history of the left in Britain and is the case currently in Europe where a number of left parties have risen to prominence in recent years.

This remains the focus for the SSP. Our aim is to build a vibrant and united movement for socialism in Scotland and engage with that whole new generation which is emerging into struggle. This rather than the false unity of the past is our priority. ■

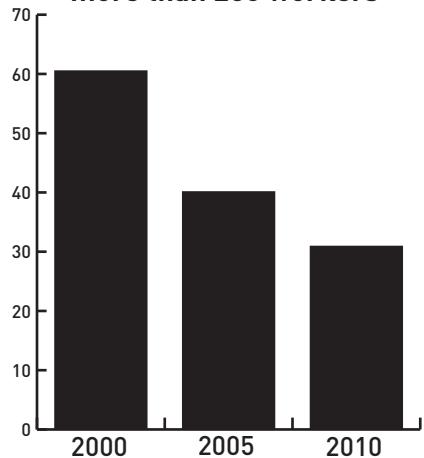
*Bill Bonnar is currently Co-Chairperson of the Scottish Socialist Party but is writing in a personal capacity.*



# Who Owns Scotland's Jobs?

Just ten years ago firms described in Scottish government statistics as 'based in Scotland' were dominant among manufacturing firms employing over 250 people. Such Scottish companies produced 60 per cent of the combined turnover. By 2005 this share had shrunk to 40 per cent. By 2010 it was down to a little over 30 per cent. And in terms of development and strategy it is these larger firms that are critical because they dominate access to export markets and contribute the great bulk of Scotland's business research and development.

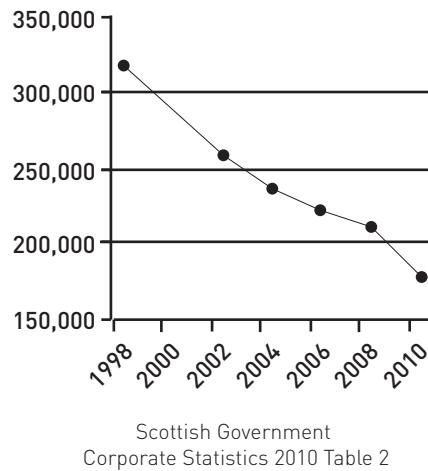
## Manufacturing firms employing more than 250 workers



This fall in Scottish ownership has been accompanied by an equally sharp fall in manufacturing employment itself. While there is no necessary connection between the two, loss of employment also underlines the need for a re-examination of policy. Another decade at the same rate of decline will see manufacturing employment fall below critical mass in most sectors.

Turning to ownership and control in all the bigger Scottish registered companies, in services as well as manufacturing, it is clear that here also there has been a major shift. In 2004 the Royal Bank of Scotland's 'Wealth Creation in Scotland' examined the value added contributed by the top 100 Scottish registered firms and suggested that these 'Scottish' companies contributed 56 per cent of the Scottish total. At the time the accuracy of these

## Manufacturing employment in Scotland



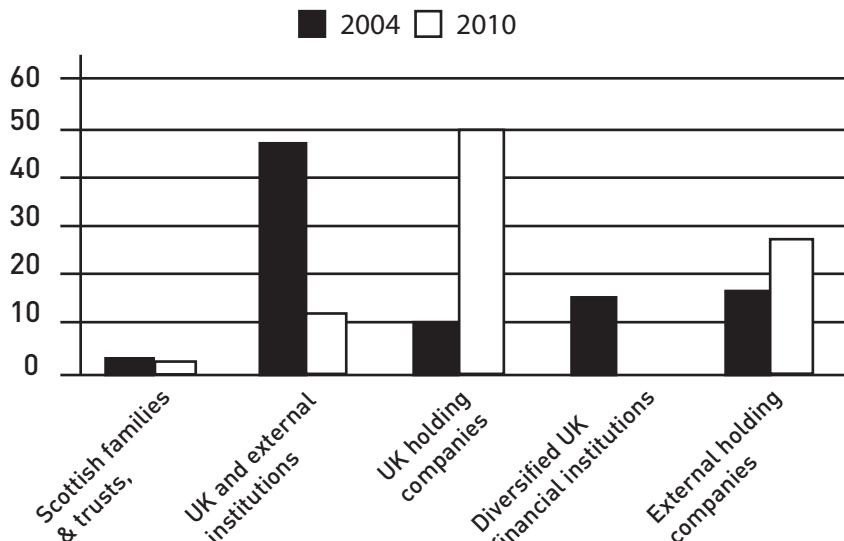
figures was queried by Brian Ashcroft. A further examination of share ownership revealed that most of the companies were in fact either subsidiaries of non-Scottish companies or largely controlled by investment banks and fund managers based outside Scotland. Those entirely owned from within Scotland – either by individuals, trusts or local authorities – contributed less than five per cent of value added (see previous graph). Subsidiaries of external holding companies contributed 28 per cent (18 per cent overseas and 10 per cent British). The remaining firms contributing over 65 per cent of value added and were all controlled by relatively small groups

of external financial institutions and fund managers (15 per cent exclusively UK and over 50 per cent jointly by UK and overseas, mainly US).

Taking the same group of Scottish registered companies in 2010 we find the subsidiaries of external holding companies now contributing over 75 per cent of value added. Obviously, part of the explanation is provided by the takeover of the two banking giants, the Royal Bank and the Bank of Scotland. But it is only part. A long list of companies from the RBS's Top 100 in 2004 were subject to external takeover over the following six years. The most vulnerable were those that had previously been in the 'external investor' category. Many had now been sold on to realise 'shareholder value'.

The scale of the change is also underlined by a longer-term comparison. In the 1970s John Scott and Michael Hughes examined patterns of ownership across the twentieth century and found a surprising degree of continuity up to the 1970s. Still at that date Scottish owners and financial institutions remained largely dominant. Using the same categories of share ownership and taking the 62 biggest Scottish registered non-financial companies, a major shift is apparent by 2004. Just under half of the biggest Scottish-registered companies were now externally-owned subsidiaries

## Top 100 biggest Scottish registered companies



Percentage of value added contributed by firms by type of ownership.

Source: FAME database

**Sandy Baird, John Foster and Richard Leonard show that Scotland's economy has seen a remarkably rapid shift towards external ownership over the past decade. What are the implications?**

### Scottish registered non-financial firms taken-over since 2004

- Scottish Power
- Scottish and Newcastle
- British Energy Group
- Christian Salvesen
- Grampian Country Foods
- Stakis
- Motherwell Bridge
- Babtie
- Paladin Resources
- Thus
- Petrofac
- Aviagen
- Salamis
- Glasgow, Edinburgh and Aberdeen Airports

### Scottish registered financial companies taken-over since 2004

- HBoS and subsid
- RBoS and subsid
- Walter Scott & Partners
- Abbey National Scotland
- Abbey National Asset Managers
- Artemis Unit Trust Managers
- ISIS Asset Management
- Kwikfit Insurance

to consolidate market share in the face of uncertain recovery. Takeover rather than internal investment is now the preferred path. But Scotland also occupies a particularly exposed position. Company ownership exists within the highly financialised Anglo-US sphere of stock-exchange share trading – in contrast to the longer-term bank and local government model of investment in France and particularly Germany. Yet at the same time Scottish firms have to compete within an EU market that is increasingly dominated by technologically much stronger firms from Germany and France which benefit from such regionally locked patterns of ownership and investment. And the Scottish financial nexus that Scott and Hughes documented for the 1970s, and which previously gave some strategic protection to Scottish industry, has now very largely gone.

This is why these statistics on ownership have significant policy implications. Both major parties in Scotland have operated within the strictly neo-liberal assumptions of British and EU industrial policy. Unchanged, it is difficult to see how this will result in anything other than a continued haemorrhage of industrial capacity – possibly at an even faster rate. The implications for Scotland's long-term economic viability are therefore serious and challenging. The private sector, still backed by the major parties as the key engine of economic recovery, appears highly unlikely to restore strategic and locally-anchored growth. Conversely, some form of public ownership, whether state, cooperative or community-based, would seem the only way of achieving development that is locally embedded and secured. This is the policy challenge – one that would seem to make it essential to overcome the external policy prohibitions on public ownership and support whether at EU or WTO level. ■

### The 62 non-financial Scottish registered firms with highest turnover

	1974	2004	2010
Wholly-owned subsidiary	7	26	29 (and 5 of the 26 dissolved)
Exclusive majority: one interest owns over 50%	11	11	7
Shared majority: more than one interest with over 50% combined	2	2	1
Exclusive minority: one interest owns between 10% and 50%	19	3	5
Shared minority: more than one interest owning between 10% and 50%	26	18	6
Limited minority: more than one interest owning between 5 and 50%	4	2	9

Source: FAME database and J. Scott and M. Hughes, *Anatomy of Scottish Capital*, London, 1980

**Sandy Baird teaches History in Dundee.**

**John Foster is Emeritus Professor, Social Sciences, University of the West of Scotland**

**Richard Leonard is Political Officer of the GMB**

# Powers, Not Anomalies

The Scotland Bill, which will give the Scottish Parliament new tax powers, now has the support of all the big political parties in Holyrood and Westminster. So there is a good chance that the Parliament will in future take major tax decisions. What might this mean?

Today the only devolved taxes are local taxes. Ministers set business rates and have found ways to freeze the Council Tax, but these taxes hardly make them accountable to the electorate, and add up to less than 15 per cent of devolved spending. So it is hard for a Scottish Government to be held accountable for taking a different view from the rest of the UK on the levels of taxation and spending.

That will change. Once the Scotland Bill is in force the Parliament will have

tax powers, including income tax, covering nearly one third of devolved spending. It can decide to tax more or less and spend accordingly. Income tax is a very visible tax and taxpayers will be able to connect what they pay to the services they get. If Scotland prefers higher public spending, then the Scottish Parliament will be able to levy the taxes to support it. If public opinion favours low taxes to stimulate growth, then that option is open too. No longer will the Scottish Parliament simply be a spending machine: it'll be a taxing one too.

Of course there is not a simple one-to-one relationship between devolved tax and spending, as there will still be a Westminster grant as well and taxes, including some income tax, will still be paid to Westminster. So every one per cent of tax change does not yield one

per cent of spending change. This is like virtually every other Parliament in a federal state: there are transfers of resources between different levels of government and different parts of the country, often justified by different needs. Some argue there should be no sharing of resources and risks across the UK: that is simply the fiscal expression of the idea of

independence. It makes sense if (and only if) you are committed to independence for other reasons.

Taxation is mainly about raising money to pay for public services, usually in the least painful way possible. But taxes are also policy instruments: they can encourage some behaviours and discourage others. The bundle of taxes to be devolved along with income tax allows some scope for this, and so does the power to create new taxes in the Bill.

One obvious example is Stamp Duty Land Tax. It will now be devolved. Together with non-domestic rates and council tax, that means that all taxation on real property in Scotland will be decided in Scotland. The Parliament will have the option of changing property taxation radically – whether to tax the value of sites, rather than buildings, or to encourage the productive rather than unproductive use of land. New taxes also offer opportunities – though maybe harder to realise – to use tax instruments to address social problems, for example excessive alcohol consumption, or access new streams of revenues such as tourist taxes. The challenge will be creative imagination.

A lot of criticisms were made of the Scotland Bill, usually from the point of view of those who favoured something much more adventurous. In the end, however, these were not strong enough to stop the Scottish Parliament supporting it by an overwhelming majority - 121-to-three. Perhaps many were persuaded by the argument that, just as devolution itself is a continuing process, the Bill's provisions are unlikely to be the final word on fiscal decentralisation. In fact they are a very significant first step – certainly by UK standards: the first time the UK Treasury has given up tax powers since it discovered the leverage to be gained by centralising taxation during the Napoleonic wars.

This article does not deal with all the criticisms of the Bill, nor the various improvements proposed to it. These are discussed in the Report of the Scotland Bill Committee. One however was given prominence in the last edition of this journal in an article by Jim and Margaret Cuthbert. It is quite technical in nature, but merits proper discussion.

## SCOTLAND HAS TAKEN THE LEAD IN TRANSFERRING FREIGHT TO RAIL

### ASLEF WILL DEFEND THE INDUSTRY AND ITS JOBS THROUGH THE RECESSION



Keith Norman  
General Secretary

Alan Donnelly  
President

Kevin Lindsay  
Scottish Officer

## In response to the article by Jim and Margaret Cuthbert in the last issue, Jim Gallacher argues that Scotland should be looking at the Scotland Bill in terms of its major powers, not its minor flaws

It's a bit of a surprise to see the "Laffer curve" popping up in a Left Review. It's more usually in the discourse of American economic libertarians, and was of course a building block of Reaganomics. Nevertheless one should not dismiss the points made by the Cuthberts simply because they rely an idea from one of Ronald Reagan's favourite economists. The Scotland Bill Committee extended them the courtesy that it gave to all its witnesses of thinking properly about what they had written to see whether this was indeed a "flaw" in the proposals. This is set out in the Committee's report (paragraphs 558 to 568).

Laffer's curve is a theoretical beast. It starts from the insight that, beyond a certain point, increasing the rate of taxation won't necessarily produce any increase in tax yield, since the tax base erodes faster than the tax rate goes up. Taxpayers' incentives change, so when tax rates get too high they may do less of the tax generating activity, like work, or devote more effort to sheltering their income from tax. Since at a 100 per cent tax rate the taxpayer has no incentive at all to generate taxable income you might expect tax yield be zero – as it would be if the tax rate was zero per cent. Hence the idea of a Laffer curve - an inverse U-shaped relationship between tax rate and tax revenue.

There must be something in this. It is clear that very high rates of tax – like the 90+ per cent marginal rates of income tax the UK once had - cause serious distortions and may indeed be counterproductive. But it suits anyone who dislikes taxes to argue that, whatever rate there is, cutting it will increase revenues. Hence Reaganomics, and huge US budget deficits: cut the tax rates and surprise, tax revenue goes down.

No-one exactly knows where the UK is on this theoretical curve, but it is pretty clear that cutting rates of income tax will not increase the amount of revenue. If that were the case we'd see an orgy of tax cutting by governments desperate to pay off debt. Nor is it remotely plausible to argue that we are near that level: again if it were, there would be an army of right-wing tax cutters alleging it was so. Nevertheless

it is reasonable to assume that if the government raises income tax there will be some disincentive effect causing the tax base to fall, and vice versa, though not necessarily by the same amount. It is difficult to be precise about the magnitudes of the effects, but they are likely to be small, or the Treasury's sums would be even wronger than they have been.

Why is this relevant to the new Scottish Income tax – and how can it disclose a flaw in it, as Jim and Margaret have for some time argued? Under the plans in the Bill, Income tax will become a shared tax. That is to say both the UK and Scottish Governments will levy a rate of income tax on Scottish taxpayers. (The UK rate will be reduced by 10p in Scotland to allow for this.) If a changing the tax rate affects the tax base, then rates set by one government will affect the income of the other – through the shared tax base. So if the UK Government were to cut its income tax, then the Scottish Government might get a bonus; conversely if Edinburgh cuts its rate, then UK income tax revenue might go up. In economics jargon these are 'vertical fiscal externalities' – vertical because they relate to different levels of government, and externalities because they are effects of decisions on those who did not take them.

The Cuthberts have argued that this is a problem. Initially their concern was that if the Scottish Government cut its rate of income tax, the total amount of income tax paid by Scottish taxpayers could go up while tax revenue accruing to the Scottish Government fell. More recently they have defined the issue more precisely: when a Scottish Government cuts income tax it bears the full revenue cost of the lower tax rate but does not get all the revenue benefits (such as they may be) from the stimulus to the tax base – some of this goes to the UK Government. Equally when they put their tax rate up they get all the fiscal benefits of the higher rates but only a fraction of the disbenefits of the consequent shrinkage in the tax base: some of this is carried by the UK. Put differently, the Laffer curve is steeper if the tax base is shared than if it is not. This leads to their conclusion – put by

them in these terms in your pages for the first time - that for a shared tax there is a somewhat greater incentive to increase rather than decrease taxes.

So is this a flaw in the plans or mildly interesting curiosity? The latter. The Cuthberts have done well to gnaw away at this issue until they formulated more precisely their nagging doubt. But in doing so they have demonstrated just how theoretical the problem is. First of all there is no evidence for UK income tax today of the size of any Laffer effect. Certainly it is not so big that growth in the tax base would offset a rate cut. Secondly, even accepting their analysis of the nature of shared tax bases, their conclusion does not follow. There are many factors that determine tax rates: the fact that slope of the Laffer curve is steeper under a shared tax than if the Scottish Government set all of income tax is unlikely to be uppermost in the mind of governments. They face the incentives they face, not some theoretical alternatives, and will have to make and justify the choices on the tax they actually have to the electorate. There are much bigger real incentives acting on governments when they make these decisions – the unpopularity of tax rises and service reductions alike. Those are what will drive tax decisions – and quite right too.

There is a great deal still to be done to put the Scotland Bill into practice, and the Bill itself would benefit from some improvements. The most important issue however is not these rather abstruse bits of economic theory but the challenge of calculating the offsetting reduction in grant from London to Edinburgh to take account of the new stream of tax income. Get that wrong and Scotland could be disadvantaged, or alternatively quids in. Neither would be right. The Scotland Bill Committee's report suggests a way to do this which is intended to ensure that the spending power of the parliament will depend on its tax choices and the success of the Scottish economy. That should offer Holyrood both opportunity and accountability, and represents the next phase in Scottish home rule.

*Jim Gallacher is Fellow of Nuffield College Oxford and lately advisor to the Scottish Parliament Committee on the Scotland Bill*

# Oor Destroyed Hoosis

This story begins around 40 years ago, when many people across Britain lived in crowded decaying slums. Councils were knocking down the slums and building millions of new homes to rent. Conditions were improving for millions of families. Public money was being used to subsidise the new homes. Councils were boasting about how many homes they had built. In Dundee's Hilltown, people protested over leaving their old homes and communities. But after the new multistorey blocks were built in Derby Street there were queues for a place in the 374 flats.



When the Derby Street multis were less than ten years old, Margaret Thatcher became Prime Minister. She wanted as many things as possible to be bought and sold for private profit. She didn't want publiclyowned houses to provide good cheap homes and a fairer society. She didn't even believe in society. She wanted more people to buy their homes and work to improve their own individual families. And she knew that people who had borrowed money to buy their homes would find it difficult to go on strike. Councils stopped boasting about how much housing they had. They began to get rid of their homes. When Margaret Thatcher left Downing Street, her ideas stayed behind – even when Labour came back into government. Most of the nicest homes were sold. Many of the others were knocked down. Councils weren't allowed to spend much money on looking after their homes and some of these homes started to become new slums. Council houses had provided homes for half the families in Scotland.

They had housed whole communities of people who did lots of different kinds of jobs. Under Margaret Thatcher and the prime ministers who came after her, industries were shut down and many of these jobs disappeared. Communities fell apart. The remaining council houses became homes of last resort for the poor.



# An illustrated essay by Sarah Glynn originally for the Derby Street Multis Residents' Association to help people learn what has happened to 'oor hoosis' and to similar houses almost everywhere

For a long time, very little money had been spent on council housing. Now the houses were looking sad. The government said they must be improved; but they gave no money to pay for this. Some councils decided it was easier to pull down homes than improve them. Dundee City Council said that they had to pull down the Derby Street multis to save the money needed to improve their other homes.



When the Council decided to demolish these homes they quoted a report. Tenants asked to see the report. The council said 'no'. Tenants asked the Scottish Information Commissioner. He told the council that the Freedom of Information Act said that they had to show the tenants the report. The report said that demolishing the homes was much more expensive than keeping them. Tenants told the newspapers everything they had learnt. The Council just said: we are demolishing homes that weren't needed and that weren't liked and this will save money.



The council said that they would sell the land to a developer. The developer would build new houses for people to buy and sell. This would make Dundee a better place for richer people to live. But they didn't say where poorer people would go.



All over the world houses were being bought and sold to make money. Big banks borrowed huge amounts of money and used it to gamble that house prices would go on rising for ever.



When house prices fell the banks lost huge amounts of money. Lots of people lost their jobs. Governments gave huge amounts of money to the banks. More

people lost their jobs. People stopped building so many houses to buy and sell. More people wanted good cheap houses to rent. But most council houses had been sold or destroyed.

Last year different councillors began to run Dundee Council. They said that perhaps the Council should keep the Derby Street multis. The council officers, who work for the Council, weren't happy. They didn't want to change their plans. They said that improving the buildings was too expensive. The tenants asked a big building company what it would cost. They said that they could improve five flats for the cost of building one new house. But the council officers said the Council didn't have enough money. The tenants asked a housing association if they would buy and improve the multis. The housing association wanted to make an agreement with the Council. But the council officers said no. And the



councillors, who are in charge of the Council, did what the council officers told them.

And that is how Dundee destroyed good houses, people were forced to leave their homes, more communities were broken up, local shops were left without customers, poorer people were moved out from the centre to the edge of the city, more people had to pay higher rents, the council lost millions of pounds of rent money and had to pay millions of pounds for demolition and the housing waiting list kept getting longer. ■

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# New Hope in Ireland

Described as a sea change by commentators, the biggest shock of Ireland's recent general election was the collapse of the vote of Fianna Fáil (FF), the State's largest party; from 41.5 per cent in 2007 to just 17.4 per cent this time. FF has governed in Ireland for 61 out of the 79 years since it was formed in 1932 and has won 14 out of the 19 general elections. Yet it now has only one TD (member of parliament) in Dublin – down from 13. Its first preference vote in Dublin was only 12.5 per cent, whereas the United Left Alliance, on its first outing, got 7.1 per cent. What stands out is the loss of support for FF among working class voters – confirming what has already been happening in local elections.

Fine Gael's vote rose almost nine per cent since 2007 to 36.1 per cent, but the combined FF-FG vote was down to 53.5 per cent. This is a far cry from the days when these two parties of the right got over 80 per cent of the popular vote; and further decline from the 1990s when they got 60-65 per cent. While the vote for the right is in decline, the left vote has risen: Labour (now firmly social-liberal, but in the eyes of many voters a leftwing force) got 19.4 per cent and Sinn Féin got 9.9 per cent.

The cause of the FF collapse is the party's very visible responsibility for the

current economic crisis, which according to Patrick Honohan, governor of Ireland's Central Bank, has led to "one of the costliest banking crises in history". The bail-out is running at €70 billion and the state is borrowing from the EU and IMF to repay loans that Ireland's speculators cannot pay – to the major banks of Germany, France and Britain.

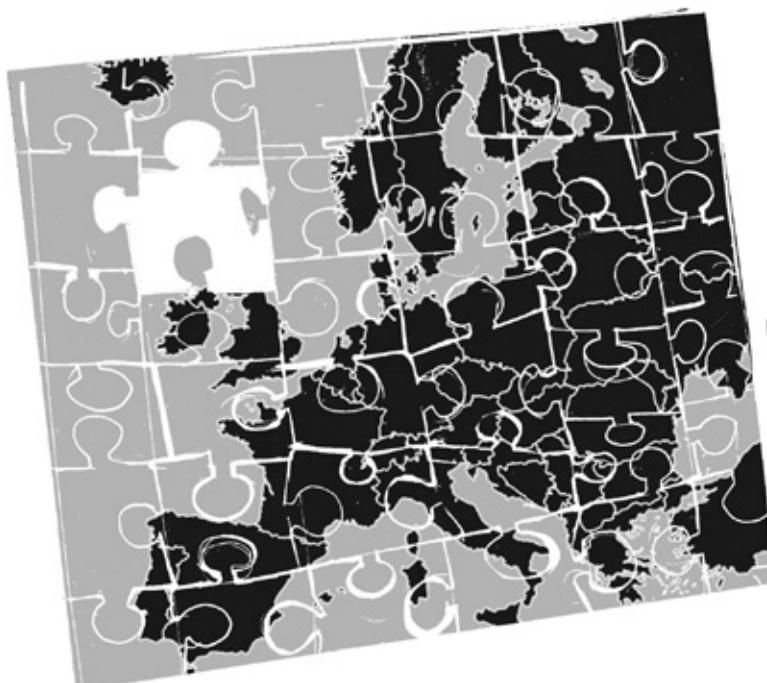
Private debt is now state – sovereign – debt through the FF-Green government commitment in November 2008 to guarantee all bank debt – a move copper-fastened by the EU-IMF deal. And the people of Ireland have been warned that default will be punished severely. FG and Labour are committed to the EU-IMF deal, which includes large-scale privatisations (including water) and a 5.8 per cent interest rate on the €85 billion loan facility – punitively higher than the current ECB base rate of 1.25 per cent. Yet the crisis has still further to go, as personal mortgage defaults rise by the month.

So while the FF defeat, along with the wipe-out of its coalition partners, the Greens, is punishment for their actions, support for FF will re-emerge at the next election due to the willingness of FG and Labour to drive through FF's budget plan, as part of the EU-IMF deal. A FF revival will be tempered by being out of office however, since a significant

factor in vote-getting by them (and FG and some Independents) is the ability to 'deliver' for the constituency by lobbying and manipulation of state spending – for the benefit of local constituencies. At the same time, mass unemployment and the deflationary wage cuts and tax rises, service cuts and privatisations that FG and Labour are planning are sure to provoke mass resistance and open a political space to the left of Labour.

The new Dáil (Irish parliament) will have its strongest ever group to the left of Labour: over 20 TDs when Sinn Féin, the ULA and left-wing independents are included. Labour however, has gone into coalition with FG – as they said they would before the election. Their program for government includes a commitment to stick to the EU-IMF bailout deal – which means cutting 25,000 public sector jobs over the next three years. And as expected, Labour got the 'social' ministries and will lead the campaign of cuts in social, education and public sector jobs. This will lead to a repeat of Labour's previous experience of coalition with the right: a short period in office followed by electoral annihilation.

While support for SF has grown, a big breakthrough in the 26 Counties has not happened. They have so-far failed to capture the radicalisation and in the eyes of many are not to be trusted. For



# The Irish election returned five TDs for the United Left Alliance, with 2.8 per cent of the first preference votes. But this victory for the Left is only part of a bigger picture of political change, writes Brendan Young.

some people, SF's past record of military activity in the Six Counties is an issue; but for others, its willingness to go into government with Ian Paisley's DUP (and carry out cuts, rather than resign) and an apparent willingness to go into coalition with FF or possibly FG is an issue (they declared themselves to be 'ready for government' in 2007). In constituencies where SF and candidates of the Left were both standing, the competition has been close.

So a new historical situation is emerging: a decline of mass support for the parties of the right (FF and FG); and a growth of support for the parties of the left (including Labour - perceived at present as being of the left). In contrast to many other European countries, we have not seen the emergence of far-right or explicitly racist parties – despite the presence of large numbers of migrant workers and unemployment rates of over 15 per cent. Support for Independent candidates likewise indicates a decline of trust in existing parties.

The ULA's emergence is therefore very timely. Initiated in November 2010, it is an alliance of three groups: the Socialist Party (SP), the People Before Profit Alliance (PBPA - in which the Socialist Workers Party is the dominant organisation); and the Tipperary Unemployed Workers Action Group. These groups realised that the socio-economic crisis was creating a political space to the left of Labour in which socialists could begin to build a small electoral base. They also had some prior success in getting socialists elected to local councils, and Joe Higgins of the SP elected as a TD and later as an MEP. The baseline for agreement was and remains a commitment never to go into coalition with FF or FG, either at local or national level. An electoral platform to challenge the crisis – whereby the rich rather than the poor should pay for the crisis – formed the basis for an electoral slate (see [www.unitedleftalliance.org](http://www.unitedleftalliance.org)). 19 ULA-endorsed candidates stood in almost half the country's constituencies in the general election, with five being elected (four in Dublin and one in South Tipperary).

Having begun as an electoral alliance, all groups agreed before the election to continue working together afterwards and to move towards forming

a new workers' party. There was, and continues to be, a debate on the tempo of this process; and on the political basis of such a new party.

A ULA convention is to be held on June 25 where the next steps on moving the process forward will be discussed. At present the ULA is a work in progress: a series of meetings are being organised countrywide from which it is hoped branches will emerge, and on which an emergent activist organisation would be based.

My view is that a functioning organisation is needed quickly, both to begin to organise those activists who want to mobilise resistance right now and in preparation for the major struggles we think are likely to break out. While the existing Programme of the ULA is adequate, it needs to be broadened to deal with other areas of politics – like health care and education. On the political program, I believe a new party should take the side (and champion) the working class and any oppressed group in any conflict with the bosses and the state. In that way a new party would accumulate its program through struggles and debate, with experienced socialists having a role in elaborating policy and proposals.

More problematic in the short term is how the existing groups organise as currents in a new party. At present, popular dissatisfaction arising from the economic crisis has only been expressed electorally. There has been little mass action, largely due to the compliance of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions with the politics of the Labour Party and the absence of a significant challenge to the ICTU leadership. Meanwhile the Left, while it has gained electorally, does not have the social weight to mobilise mass opposition. So the numbers engaging in struggles is relatively small, meaning that the numbers likely to join the ULA in the short term is small.

This means that the SP and SWP have a disproportionate weight in the emergent ULA. Placing the creation of a new organisation in its own right, over and above their own, is a challenge to them both because their tradition is

one of recruitment to their own groups. In this context, the production of an independent publication for the ULA – to give expression to our views and an independent identity to the organisation – remains an argument to be won. In the longer term a publication, and an influx

of new activists, is how the tendency towards the ULA remaining federal – an alliance of independent groups as against a more organisationally homogenous formation – can be overcome.

Other pressures on the ULA include the difficulties in getting the 5 TDs working together as a coherent group, with initiatives in the Dáil relating to activities outside; and the establishment of mechanisms of accountability of elected representatives to the organisation as a whole. Some of us are painfully aware of the tragic evolution of Tommy Sheridan and of the need to maintain close links between the parliamentary group and the membership. This is particularly the case in Ireland, where there is a long (and corrupting) tradition of clientism – with pressure on TDs to keep vociferous local people happy.

The recent general election was a great step forward for the Left in Ireland: the five ULA TDs get much more airtime to promote the ideas of the Left (due to the speaking rules of the Dáil) than many Labour backbenchers – much to the chagrin of the latter. But it is the next election which will provide the real opportunity for an electoral breakthrough – when disaffection with Labour will be profound. In the meantime we must demonstrate to those workers who come into struggle that we can be a valuable resource in their battles – providing a platform, organisation and leadership when appropriate. This is the challenge facing the ULA. We welcome the support and solidarity of all socialists and internationalists in this challenge. ■

## The recent general election was a great step forward for the Left in Ireland

Brendan Young is an independent socialist active in PBPA and the ULA in Dublin. Feedback and / or comments can be mailed to [young.brend@gmail.com](mailto:young.brend@gmail.com)

# Reviews

## The Globalization of Addiction, A Study in Poverty of the Spirit

Bruce K. Alexander, OUP, 2009,  
ISBN 978-0-19-923012-9, £19.95

Canadian psychologist Bruce K. Alexander has written a compelling account of our era's problems. Addictions are interchangeable, he says, and there is no such thing as an inherently addictive drug or behaviour (even heroin fails to enslave non-dislocated individuals), addiction being due to "psychosocial dislocation", in turn caused by "hypercapitalism". He backs his arguments with copious evidence (from as far back as ancient Greece), summarised in the highly readable text and expanded on in endnotes.

The title of the first chapter hints at the main message ("Roots of Addiction in Free-market Society") and the chapter illustrates it by examining Vancouver. The local particulars of colonisation, business interests, wealth, poverty and the impact of various projects and schemes will resonate with most city-dwellers – particularly with city planners, drugs workers, social workers, community arts workers, health workers and law enforcers.

In the chapter titled "The Role of Addiction in the Civilised Madness of the 21st Century", Alexander examines "fanatical addiction to socially destructive ideas", discussing Adolf Eichmann and an "academic bureaucrat" (a professor at an American university – compulsory reading for all teachers and lecturers feeling compromised in our increasingly money-minded "educational" institutions). He asks "how is environmental madness possible?", discussing excess consumption (including "shopaholism"), and explains religious zealotry. In a section titled "Political and economic fanaticism" Alexander examines the "addictive complex" of "Christian moralism", "Market God" and "American Power", stating, "the demands of the three doctrines [...] are so internally inconsistent that they defy [...] analysis [and this] requires United States policymakers to invoke holy mysteries such as the necessity of torture to prevent

terror, the need to support dictatorships in order to spread democracy [and] the precise geographical localisation of 'evil' in the nations that resist United States geopolitical ambitions [...]."

The chapter "Getting by" considers how most of us cope: "resolute conventionality", "resolute unconventionality", "participating in a concocted community", "political activism", the "tragically cool", the "spiritually sufficient" and the "ex-addict". Alexander maintains that these lives lack joy and asks, "where will society turn to find [...] inspired, fully functioning leaders and workers [needed] to pull the world out of its current crises?"

In "Spiritual Treatment for Addiction", Alexander states that spirituality is no panacea but, in "From Blindness and Paralysis to Action", professes faith that "human beings, reasoning together in a rigorous way, are capable of reaching understandings that are [...] practicable, effective, and spiritually

uplifting". He describes free-market society's obscuring of "the connections between free markets, mass dislocation, and addictive misery because seeing them would undermine its foundational belief in the magnanimity of free markets". The "misbegotten War on Drugs" is dismissed as a "bizarre spectacle of sightless, murderous flailing", providing "justification for American political and military incursions in Latin America". "Even failure on an enormous scale," writes Alexander, "did not open most people's eyes to the futility of a war that so perfectly shielded free-market society from painful self-examination".

However, the failings of free-market capitalism are increasingly obvious. Alexander talks of "eye-opening

disasters" – amongst others the bursting of the stock market bubble in 2002, the exposure of "devastating corruption in superstar transnational corporations", the "impoverishment of the middle- and working-class people in the richest countries relative to their compatriots in the boardrooms and executive offices", "famine and epidemics in [...] countries that have accepted the free-market reforms of the IMF and World Bank" and "the [...] slaughter of Third-World people by corporate as well as national armies spreading free-market society". The turmoil in Iraq, the New Orleans flood fiasco and the credit crisis are described as "dark stains [...] on the whitewashed daily news".

Blindness increasingly less of a problem then, what explains our paralysis? Alexander writes: "most people live in a haze [...], hoping to find satisfaction in the glittering baubles that free-market society showers down upon the affluent world". Moving to personal action requires the "recognition

of addictive dynamics that are not connected to drugs and alcohol [such as] love, food, work, fantasy, narcissistic self-absorption, shopping, gambling, ideology, television, video games...". He acknowledges that "awareness of addiction [...] is acutely painful" but says that "it does not need to provoke incapacitating despair" and can provoke action. Alexander recommends "finding a secure place in a real community" and notes, "most people [...] can use their hard-won experiences to help others".

With regard to professional action, Alexander argues that "treatment will become more effective when it is oriented towards achieving [...] psychosocial integration" but suggests that professionals "let the public know

**He describes free-market society's obscuring of "the connections between free markets, mass dislocation, and addictive misery because seeing them would undermine its foundational belief in the magnanimity of free markets"**

that the power of the treatment that they themselves do is often seriously exaggerated by governments and media as a way of distracting attention from the more costly interventions that are needed".

Alexander urges societal change – the domestication of capitalism in diverse ways – advising that we “face the degree to which we have been seduced by the flimsy reassurances of free-market ideology, and the ways that we have personally contributed to various kinds of dislocation in occupational roles (‘just doing my job’), political inaction (‘it’s just too depressing’), and so on”. He defends himself against the charge of naiveté and introduces the concept of “we” and “they”, saying that the “conflict is not between [...] good people and bad people [...]. [It] is between two overarching world views, both of which abide [...] within most people.” Amongst other “intellectual land mines that could cripple us” is “the dream that free-market society can be saved by more of the same: more growth, more production, more cheap energy, more free markets [...].” He states “the intellect of a single human being never amounts to much, but truth-seeking groups can become very powerful indeed”.

The final chapter describes what we can do to “domesticate capitalism”. He writes of the role of alternative media (hooray, SLR!), the reclaiming of real estate, community art, the rewriting of drug laws (devolve to the local level), the reclamation of Christianity, and the “outflanking” of the university (the subjugation of higher education to the needs of hypercapitalism is illustrated with appalling clarity from the author’s personal experiences). This is followed by a section on social action at the global level, in which Alexander welcomes the loss of US influence in Latin America and the establishment of the “new Bank of the South to replace the ideologically governed IMF and the World Bank”. He also discusses the Tobin Tax, citizen boycotts and other areas.

Alexander’s conclusion (“The missing, magical piece of the puzzle”) anticipates a “galvanising alternative philosophy [...] together with images, ceremonies, music and metaphysics that can give it life in human hearts and minds”. He states that this lies beyond the “prosaic imagination of rationalistic academics” and writes, “the talented people who can produce [this] will materialise, as others have in previous

eras of despair”. “In the meantime,” he urges “determined social action”.

It is fitting that a citizen of what is possibly the most environmentally destructive country on the planet (search “Alberta tar sands”) should have written this urgently-needed book. Alexander the Great, motivated by personal ambition, briefly united

numerous nations to form a vast empire. Alexander, author and philosopher, motivated by concern for the wellbeing of his fellows, will, I hope, prove to have been a significant force in uniting the best in all of us, leading to a lasting coalition against the divisive forces of hypercapitalism.

*The Globalization of Addiction, A Study in Poverty of the Spirit* is not so much a call to arms, as a resounding call to link arms. This is a must-read, alongside Wilkinson and Pickett’s *The Spirit Level*.

(Scottish notes: Those seeking a Scottish perspective on the topics Alexander raises could do worse than read Kevin Williamson’s little gem, *Drugs and the Party Line*, and Katherine Trebeck’s report, “Whose Economy? Winners and losers in the new Scottish economy”.) ■

R. Eric Swanepoel (author of *Saving the World and Being Happy*, previously reviewed in SLR)

## River of Fire: The Clydebank Blitz

John Macleod, Birlinn 2010,  
ISBN 1843410494, £16.99

Born in the West of Scotland just after the Second World War I grew up with knowledge of the London Blitz but with very little awareness of the events in Clydebank in March 1941. My parents were living in Dumbarton when Clydebank was bombed and my mother was so horrified that she fled the West of Scotland and returned to her native Cowdenbeath.

One of the themes of Macleod’s book on the Clydebank Blitz is how the destruction of a Scottish town in a period of two nights has been forgotten by the wider public in Scotland and beyond. Returning to a personal note,

I remember Jimmie Cowie, a drouthy neebor of my father’s in Fife in the 1960s. He was a survivor of the Blitz

but on the only occasion when I tried to quiz him about the events of March 13 and 14, 1941, he simply said he did not want to talk about it and returned to his game of dominoes.

Now, more than 70 years on, most of the survivors have left us and it may be easier to talk and write about those days and their place in the History of Modern Scotland. Macleod does not confine himself to a cold narration of the horrors of the bombing but uses every opportunity to make clear his opinions on everything from the place of Incapacity Benefit in the Welfare Benefits System to his opinions on the Rt Hon Henry MacLeish. (He likes him.)

For me the book raises questions that have troubled me for many years. In my youth I went on a visit to the city of Dresden. This was in 1964 when the horrors of the destruction of Dresden in February 1945 were still visible and very much in people’s memories. And yet I was only vaguely aware of the events of Clydebank. I knew of Coventry, but not of a town much nearer to me. Then as now I cannot answer the troubling questions about the moral justification for saturation bombing of civilian targets in wartime. Macleod has the simplistic answer that bombing Clydebank was a war crime but the strategic bombing of German city under the guidance of Bomber Harris was part of a “Just War” and therefore excusable.

Whatever our moral position on the role of the Luftwaffe and of Bomber Command, we owe thanks to Macleod for bringing this dark episode in Contemporary History to our attention. I for one shall visit Clydebank over the summer months and spend some time thinking on the innocent victims of those two nights of bombing 70 years ago. ■

Hamish Kirk

# web review

Henry McCubbin

“I think that there was a context in this election where you had two parties, Labour and the SNP, fighting essentially against the Tory Government in London... We did not sufficiently set out a compelling and clear alternative to what Alex Salmond is proposing for the future of Scotland. I think what he is proposing is dangerous in terms of separatism.”

And still they don't get it. The above is a quote from Ed Milliband as he gave his considered opinion on the outcome of the Scottish General Election. It has been unkindly pointed out that every seat visited by Ed Milliband in Scotland was lost by Labour to the SNP. His analysis may have been that as perceived by a visitor but within Scotland, Labour ran its campaign at first fighting against the Tory Government in London then against their straw man construct of separatism.

But hadn't Labour told us in the 2010 UK election that only Labour at Westminster could defend us from the Tories? Well Scotland did vote for that defence and fat lot of good it has done us. On the other hand the SNP fought

the Scottish election on what they would do by themselves in Scotland to improve the ordinary Scottish citizen's lot whilst arguing for technical improvements to our economic relationship with the rest of the UK. Albeit with the precocious confidence to reserve the UN right of self determination as a legitimate basis to put to the people of Scotland in a referendum should they feel hampered by the British establishment in achieving their goals.

However Milliband can perhaps be understood better when we locate him at the centre of a metropolitan elite, the infamous Westminster bubble. But how can we excuse Ken MacIntosh MSP who is quoted in the Herald as saying “In most Holyrood debates the intellectual argument was nearly always won by Labour - but the public didn't get the message”. This is tantamount to calling the electorate thick. The problem for the Labour Party was that the public got the message loud and clear. This was the party that once committed itself to secure for ordinary people the full fruits of their labour, its equitable

distribution and the best obtainable system of popular administration and control of each industry or service. Now it is the party of PFI and lax banking legislation giving bonuses to bankers and the sack to ordinary workers. It is a party of warmongering whose ministers have been reduced to travelling salespersons for arms dealers. Where's the intellectual argument for these? ■

[forargyll.com/2011/05/scottish-election-2011-what-happened-and-what-happens-next/](http://forargyll.com/2011/05/scottish-election-2011-what-happened-and-what-happens-next/)

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VLADIMIR McTAVISH'S

# Kick Up The Tabloids

## LABOUR JOB VACANCY TARGET – ONE SO FAR

Global events during the run-up to polling day, made for less press coverage of the Scottish Election. However, you have to hand it to Barrack Obama. As an opening gambit in a re-election campaign, taking out bin Laden certainly trumps Alex Salmond's pledge to freeze council tax.

However, the result of the Holyrood elections was no less historic as the SNP swept to an overall majority, as the people of Scotland stuck two fingers up to all the other parties. We stuck two fingers up at Labour for their complacency. We stuck two fingers up at the Lib Dems for their treachery. And we stuck two fingers up at the Tories, because we like sticking two fingers up at the Tories.

It's obvious that Scotland had two things to say. Firstly, that they cannot forgive the Lib Dems for the Westminster coalition, their share of the vote being on a par with the Monster Raving Loony Party. Secondly, the people of Scotland are also still saying "Iain Gray? Who he?". The Labour leader ran an amazing campaign, traveling the length and breadth of Scotland for an entire month without once being recognised by a member of the public.

Even the demonstrator who confronted him in Glasgow Central Station was obviously a bit unsure as to who he was, as he was holding a placard demanding an end to Tory cuts, a cause I had thought Iain Gray shared. However, as history will record, he did not stoop to the easy response of debating the issues. No, he took the dignified option of running away and hiding in a sandwich shop.

I bumped into Iain Gray at Kinross services, when he was traveling up to Dundee for the leaders' debate, and saw him receiving the toilet key from the woman behind the counter at

WH Smith, who showed no flicker of recognition as she handed it over. Which pretty much summed the man up for me. Not only his anonymity but his lack of ambition. I'm all for a hands-on, man-of-the-people approach to campaigning, but anyone who aspires to be the leader of our nation should get someone else to fetch them the keys to the lavvy. Gray had pledged to create 250,000 new jobs if elected. And he ended up creating one new job. The trouble for him is that it's his own job as leader of Scottish Labour.

So dramatic was the SNP's victory that it even took the Royal Wedding and bin Laden off the front pages in England. While I found the outpouring of patriotic bollocks on Wedding Day deeply depressing, I was heartened by the attitude of the people of Glasgow, who decided to mark their day off by having a booze-fuelled rammy with the Polis in Kelvingrove Park. However, it did amaze me that people camped out overnight outside Westminster Abbey to get a view. Having said that, I'm going to camp out overnight outside Westminster Abbey so that I don't miss a moment of Thatcher's funeral.

Those who'd hoped to see bin Laden's funeral were of course to be disappointed, as the US Navy Seals dumped his body in the sea. This sounds to me very much like "The dog ate my homework" and will only lead to conspiracy theories and reported sightings for years to come. Incidentally is it just me, or was anyone else confused when they heard that the World's most wanted man had been killed by Seals ? I think the whole thing was a cunning plan by bin Laden himself, to publicise his back catalogue of videos being re-released on Blue-Ray.

However, I did think "A Royal Wedding and bin Laden's killing in the

same week, what's happening that they don't want us to know about?". Perhaps they were trying to deflect attention from the AV referendum. I do think people were both apathetic and confused about the AV referendum. Some people thought they had two votes in the referendum and put 1 next to Yes, and 2 next to No.

It does seem a strange approach to voter apathy to give people who aren't bothered about voting once the chance to vote several times. I think the public was even more confused by the role of celebrity transvestite Eddie Izzard as the face of the "Yes to AV" campaign. This merely added to people being confused as to what the letters AV actually stand for, as if we were having a poll about cross-dressing. Now had he been campaigning for Yes to the Transferable Vote, then there would have been widespread confusion.

Proportional representation, in whatever form, is never a fail-safe option. This year's Scottish election is an example of a positive outcome for. However, it has in the past delivered a number of disastrous results. Hitler was elected by PR. More recently, it was PR which gave the Labour Party Ed Milliband. The Labour leader, or the other Milliband brother as most people know him, is to have an operation to cure him of his nasal speaking voice. This is caused by sleep apnea, which apparently causes him to wake up with a jolt in the middle of the night. I reckon the reason Ed Milliband wakes up with a jolt in the middle of the is that he's still in a state of shock about winning the Labour leadership.

Vladimir McTavish is appearing at The Stand Comedy Club at this year's Edinburgh Fringe.

# VISIT OUR REDESIGNED WEBSITE

The screenshot shows the homepage of the Scottish Left Review website. At the top, the title "Scottish Left Review" is displayed along with a subtitle "a journal of the left in scotland". A search bar is located in the top right corner. Below the header, a navigation menu includes links for "ISSUE 63", "ABOUT SLR", "ARCHIVE", "SHOP", "RESOURCES", "CONTACT US", and "JOIN US". To the right of the menu, the text "ISSUE 63" is repeated. The main content area features several articles from Issue 63. One article, "ISSUE 63: SO MUCH LEFT AND NOWHERE TO GO", is highlighted with a large thumbnail showing road signs and the text "SO MUCH LEFT AND NOWHERE TO GO". Other articles include "COMMENT: ISSUE 63" (with a speech bubble icon), "ALL IS NOT LOST" (with a person holding a megaphone icon), "ANATOMY OF DIVISION" (with a person icon), "INFLUENCE NOW, UNITE LATER" (with a king icon), "IN WHOSE INTEREST?" (with a person icon), and "ANSWERS FOR A BETTER WAY" (with a question mark icon). Each article has a brief description and a "Read more" link.

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