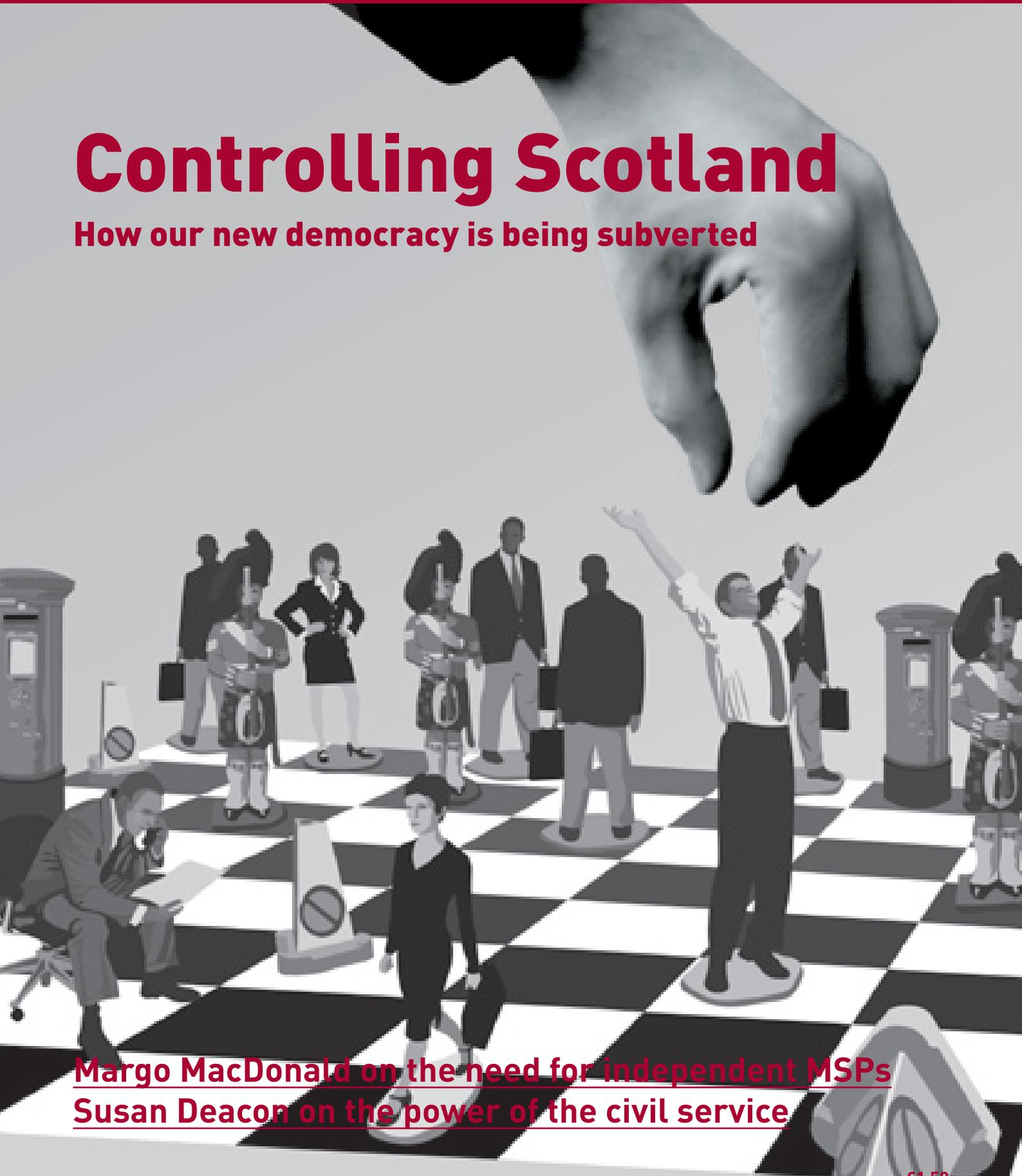


Controlling Scotland

How our new democracy is being subverted



Margo MacDonald on the need for independent MSPs
Susan Deacon on the power of the civil service

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scottishleftreview

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comment

Conspiracy has become very fashionable, but only so long as we don't take it seriously. The '90s saw the proliferation of television programmes, films, internet chat-rooms and bar conversations all dedicated to one conspiracy theory or another. This was all fine because it was only a bit of fun. At the same time, disillusionment with the political process became the dominant view; of course they're shafting us, but what do you expect? There was a new commandment; believe whatever you want, so long as you don't expect it to be true or expect to be able to change it. The organised corruption which is behind so much of government is only on a par with the latest rumour linking The Simpsons with satanic worship, or it is an unavoidable part of life.

Forty years ago an entire nation would rather believe that a bullet could repeatedly change direction of its own accord than believe that a state apparatus could lie about the murder of its leader. Now we shrug our shoulders when we hear that a donation of a few thousand pounds to his party persuaded the Prime Minister to buy massive amounts of an overpriced and under-effective medicine when better alternatives were available. Michael Moore has produced persuasive, damning and popular accounts of the corruption of American government and its relationship with the gun lobby but while he has sold plenty books and tickets, it has had no visible impact on the American voter. George Monbiot has put together a file of crucial questions about the corruption and lying involved in PFI projects which the Government ought to be forced to answer, but which it simply ignores. Almost the entire world knows that Iraq and Al Quaida are unlinked and that Bush only wants Iraq for the oil, but that still isn't going to stop him. It seems that a conspiracy has never had a better chance of being believed, but has never had less likelihood of changing anything.

Much of this issue of the Scottish Left Review will be dismissed; by some because it is 'just another conspiracy theory', and by others because, well, "what do you expect?". This is a mistake. The issues raised in this issue are of enormous importance to Scotland. We have asked a number of leading writers to ask the question Who Really Controls Scotland? The picture which emerges is not an encouraging one.

We find a Parliament of politicians so strictly controlled by their parties that the debate over whether there should be 129 or 107 MSPs seems unnecessary - four would pretty well cover it. There are only about ten different opinions in the entire Parliament, and about six of those only get

one vote each. In the political parties, democracy has been subverted. The likelihood that a party's policies will reflect the views of its members in any meaningful way has receded into the realms of improbability - from which part of the Labour Movement did the idea of 'faith schools' emerge? Local politics are no less controlled. In a political structure in which issues such as planning are supposed to be unwhipped, Special Responsibility Allowances and other perks which can be removed ensure that voting always takes place on party lines. Almost every decision is made by the same three or four people.

What is so worrying about this situation is not just that the decisions are controlled, but that the scrutiny of those decisions is so minimal as to leave us little idea of why they have been made. In local government, and in the Parliament although to a lesser extent, it is very difficult for the general public to know whether a decision has been made in their interests or not.

Then there are the external controls. Within months of its establishment, the Parliament is being circled by the corporate vultures who know they can expect privileged access. Too many of the politicians, meanwhile, seem unable to differentiate between the interests of the Scottish economy and the interests of an individual company. So we have the Scottish Parliament Business Exchange which seems to be as much about 'exchange' as a burglary; the companies get what they want, the politicians get a better understanding of what the company wants. Corporate power probably does have less influence at Holyrood than in many other Parliaments (no macro economic powers, you see), but that is exactly the kind of complacency which may cost us dear.

Then there is the civil service, still with an enormous amount of power and still with its own agendas. For the ambitious (and powerful) Scottish civil servant the next move is often out of Scotland, and that may be where they see their interests. Overlapping with this, indeed overlapping with almost everything, are Scotland's formal and informal networks. A quick look at the Speculative Society affair should be enough to raise concern. Can you be sure that you are getting a fair hearing in court if you are the only player not dining together that night? It is not just formal networks that should concern us; the political affiliation of Scotland's 'quangocracy' has been shown to be pretty incestuous.

And finally, there is our neighbour. Scotland's desire for devolution had gone too far for Westminster to stop it, but

that doesn't mean our Parliament can't be interfered with. One anonymous writer paints a pen picture of how anything which our Parliament does which might embarrass London will be addressed, ruthlessly if necessary.

This is our new democracy; held ransom by unaccountable parties or local administrations which allow no dissent and barely need to explain or justify the decisions they push through, where powerful corporate interest get unfair access, where the paid officials have their own agenda, where shady networks conspire to produce mutually beneficial outcomes, and where we have to look over our shoulder in case our neighbours get annoyed. Indeed, the list is only this short because the Scottish Left Review is of finite size.

It has taken less than three years for this state of affairs to emerge. It was precisely because so many parliaments seemed to have been ransacked by special interest groups that the Scottish Parliament was designed with

better safeguards in place. Let us not lose perspective; Scotland doesn't have America's sinister one-dollar-one-vote democracy, nor quite the European Union's tangle of competing self interest. Nevertheless, it is not paranoia to take the view that Holyrood is at a crucial moment in a siege. If ground is given now, it will be extremely difficult to regain it later. We must take the threats to open government and address them now.

There are things we can do. Reforming the whipping system in the Parliament, encouraging more independents and minority parties, reforming local government, devolving the civil service, taking away privileged access from powerful corporations (or giving it to others on an equal basis), reclaiming the political parties and forcing more disclosure of interests; all of these things can, will, make a difference. But there is a fundamental shift we must also make. We must not dismiss any attempt to cast a light on the processes of government as paranoia or conspiracy. Nor must we

assume that this is the natural state of things. These corruptions, large and small, don't just happen; they are made to happen. It is no surprise that while the public may have lost interest in government, corporations and other interest groups have never been more involved, engaged or connected. We must spare our politicians some of our scepticism, and redirect it towards some of those who are standing in the shadows just behind them.

We created our Parliament. It is also our job to keep it safe. ■

The debate over whether there should be 129 or 107 MSPs seems unnecessary - four would pretty well cover it. There are only about ten different opinions in the entire Parliament, and about six of those only get one vote each

a parliament without dissent

John McAllion argues that dissent is being abolished in the Scottish Parliament as the political parties marginalise their own MSPs

Since its beginnings the labour movement's commitment to achieving political change through representative democracy has rarely wavered. Great faith was placed in the struggle for universal suffrage, secret ballots, republicanism and independent Labour representation as a means of delivering democratic and representative parliamentary institutions leading to a fundamental and irreversible shift in the balance of power and wealth in favour of workers and their families. Mainstream Left politics has always been steeped in parliamentary ways and many would argue that those ways have delivered for workers and their families. They point to the welfare state and the NHS created during that parliamentary high water mark of 1945-48. They recall the progress in civil rights and equal opportunities achieved during the Labour governments of the 1960's and 1970's. Today, supporters of New Labour list the delivery of a national minimum wage, tax credits and increased spending on public services as just some of the achievements of left of centre parliamentarianism.

Yet, from a socialist perspective this analysis throws up two distinct features that call into question the validity of the parliamentary road. Firstly, each successive wave of Labour governments turns out to be less radical and less socialist than its predecessor. And secondly, there is almost a complete absence of evidence that such a road is leading to a fundamental and irreversible shift in the balance of power and wealth in favour of workers and their families.

New Labour's slogan "for the many not the few" cannot disguise today's realities. The gap between rich and poor has widened. Public services are chronically underfunded. Low pay is endemic among public sector workers. Trade unions still languish under some of the most severe restrictions in the European Union. Privatisation creeps across our public services. Faith in deregulation and free markets dominates economic thinking. Whatever else it is, this is not socialism. So what has gone wrong? There are many complex economic, social and political factors, but let me focus on one long neglected area, the struggle inside Parliament itself to direct, defuse and control those elected by the people to deliver socialist change - Labour MPs and now Labour MSPs.

If the parliamentary road to socialism was ever to deliver, then the main burden of that delivery was always going to fall upon the shoulders of these parliamentary foot soldiers. Yet there has been relatively little attention paid

to the functioning of the parliamentary party and its key role within the greater narrative of our democratic system as a whole. From the earliest days of the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) there were great concerns that working class representatives would be too easily seduced by the trappings of power and wealth that surround the Westminster Parliament. Kier Hardie made it a condition of taking the Labour whip that no MP could be seen drinking in any House of Commons bar, a condition long since abandoned. Nye Bevan posted a warning about the traditions and atmosphere of a seat of power that had been beguiling legislators for more than 6 centuries. This he described as "ancestor worship" and reminded new members to resist its attractions because these were not our ancestors.

Yet despite these concerns, some ordinary backbenchers have been beguiled and seduced by the Mother of all Parliaments into becoming Westminster's voice in their constituency rather than their constituency's voice in Westminster. The status and monetary rewards that go with membership of the House of Commons, mixing daily with the great figures of national politics, being treated for the first time in their lives as a VIP are simply too much of a temptation for some. Fear of losing these advantages is sufficient to persuade them that their prime political objective is to hold on to their seat, and with it, their continuing membership of the most exclusive club in London. Taking on the political establishment that they have only just joined was never going to be on their agendas. They are every party whip's dream backbenchers.

Westminster has also a centuries-long tradition of absorbing and incorporating opposition rather than confronting it. Those ambitious to get hold of the reins of power and to make a real difference to ordinary people's lives can usually persuade themselves that the only practical way of doing so is to compromise and cut a deal with the system. They quickly realise that the only way to rise through the parliamentary ranks is to please the leadership and impress the whips. If this means sacrificing their previous commitment to socialist ideas and policies on the altar of their own rise to prominence, then that is a sacrifice they are prepared to make.

Relying on such human weakness, however, was never going to be sufficient for a political establishment faced with the prospect of a mass party of workers capable of winning a parliamentary majority and beginning the transition to socialism. There would have to be other

safeguards and checks to ensure that things, while they might get a bit better for workers, would never be allowed to get out of control. Newly elected Labour MPs are therefore required to sign agreements that they will stand by the parliamentary party's standing orders and code of conduct. These make it clear that members are expected to act in harmony with the policies of the PLP and to do nothing that will bring the party into disrepute. Although their right to abstain from voting on matters of deeply held personal conviction is recognised, it is made clear that this does not entitle them to vote against the party whip.

These rules give the whips sufficient power to deal with any rebels, while allowing them the flexibility to bend the rules when it is politic to do so. From time to time, the whip is removed from troublemakers to send a message to potential sympathisers on the back benches. Occasionally, rebellion is ignored because the rebels have widespread support in the wider party. Very occasionally, the rebels are tolerated if not encouraged because they have powerful supporters within the Government itself. More usually, rebels are allowed their acts of rebellion, while it is made clear to everyone else that in doing so they have sacrificed any prospect of promotion or advancement.

Like everything else about the Westminster political machine the key to the success of this strategy is its flexibility. The political context will dictate the extent to which disciplinary powers are used. The purpose is not to drive rebels out of the party since they potentially could be a far greater political threat outside of rather than inside the party. The real purpose is to isolate them within the party, and to insulate the rest of the party from their influence. This is a strategy that has worked wonderfully well so far. It is not uncommon for fiery young rebels to throw down successive challenges to the parliamentary leadership early in their careers, only to moderate in later years and join the leadership, or even become leaders themselves.

Even New Labour, with its control freak tendency, recognises the importance of tolerating managed dissent within the PLP. Their huge majorities have allowed them to shrug off rebellions of up to 100 without seriously putting their programme for government at risk. The value of demonstrating socialist dissent within Labour ranks at a time when the party stands accused of abandoning socialism cannot be underestimated. Such an approach, of course, can only work under the first past the post electoral system that throws up huge parliamentary majorities. Surely, it would all be different at Holyrood?

Yet, the balance of political forces within Holyrood has meant that party control has been tightened rather than loosened in the new Parliament. The Labour-led coalition has a majority of only 12 in the Parliament. Within the coalition, the Lib-Dems have a tradition of allowing

dissenters to vote against the party line where conscience or constituency interest dictates. This means that just 4 or 5 Labour dissenters voting against the Executive could lead to parliamentary defeat. Huge efforts are therefore made to minimise any Labour dissent within the Parliament. Initially this was done by using the selection process to weed out potential troublemakers such as Dennis Canavan and Isobel Lindsay. Thereafter, the importance of group loyalty was emphasised.

Although, like Westminster, the Scottish Government operates along Cabinet lines, there is weekly consultation with the Labour group on the decisions they make. If the majority in the group support the Cabinet decisions, it is then argued that all members of the group are tied into supporting those decisions in the Parliament itself. This is intended to deny critics of Cabinet policy within the group the opportunity to oppose such decisions from the back benches by speaking and voting against them. Effectively, we then are left with a kind of hybrid system, in which the Cabinet continue to make the key decisions, while the group are collectively bound by those decisions through a quasi-council style group mechanism. The new system of Scottish government therefore has adopted the worst rather than the best of Westminster and local government practice. Indeed, the ability of members to make a difference from the back benches by mounting opposition to government policy is seriously curtailed and restricted in Holyrood. Back bench speeches are limited to just four minutes. Party whips submit lists of speakers in order of priority to the presiding officers. Members' debates at the close of business are allocated through a Bureau that is made up of party whips.

This cannot be allowed to continue. One of the most despised aspects of the old Westminster regime was the use of the whipping system to stifle criticism and debate, and to politically neuter the majority of the government's back benches. It would be a political tragedy if we allowed that feature to be imported into Holyrood. It represents the stifling of democracy rather than the rebirth of democracy that Holyrood was meant to represent.

Nowhere in the standing orders of the Parliament or in the literature produced by the Consultative Steering Group on how the parliament should work will you find any mention of political parties. A reader of our constitutional doctrines would be unaware of their existence. Yet they remain the most powerful force operating within the Parliament and effectively control what it does or does not do. I think the time has come for a debate about what they do and whether they are a democratic or anti-democratic influence.

Thereafter, the debates around the parliamentary road to socialism could begin in earnest. ■

John McAllion is the MSP for Dundee East

campaigning for independents

It's the parties and not the politicians which are creating disillusion with the Parliament, argues Margo MacDonald, and the solution is more independent MSPs

“Are you going to do it, then...stand as an Independent, Aken?” If I had a pound for every conversation with a taxi-driver, or a supermarket shopping-trolley driver, that had started with that enquiry I'd be well on the way to paying for an election address...or a visit to my pal Nellie Dottin in Barbados.

The topic was much talked about in and around Edinburgh after the selection process which resulted in my being dumped by the SNP, “for the good of the party”, as explained by one deeply dippy dingbat delegate, and then the nastiness of the attempt by manipulative and malicious MSPs to cite my medical condition as proof of my inability to do the job.

Some people thought I was being cute in refusing to outline my future plans in media interviews and private conversations. I wasn't. I wanted time to consider my options. I needed time to complete work to which I was already committed without the distraction of another personalised flurry of interviews etc. Also, my years of practicing the black arts of democratic politics, and of observing others at the same game, dictated the requirement of allowing the holidays to come and go, for the imperatives of other people's lives, (and events, dear boy, events) to create some distance, and perspective, from which to evaluate my de-selection.

Much to my surprise, the question continues to be put, now that we're back from the recess and into the old routine on the Mound. In fact, the frequency with which I'm asked, and the intensity with which I'm urged to stand as an Independent next May, is increasing. Without the benefit of the interpretation of the responses of a fully-fledged focus group, I can only offer readers a personal view as to the reason.

Firstly, without wishing to be falsely modest, I suspect the enthusiasm I detect for myself as an Independent owes at least as much to a growing trend away from supporting established parties as it does to my having been involved with campaigns and initiatives touching on a range of issues in Edinburgh for the past quarter century. The tendency is for commentators to hang the blame on the Scottish Parliament's politicians for the public's disenchantment with politics. The political hacks who do

so are lazy researchers, and they're wrong. Even as the same superficial scribblers were writing paeans of praise about Labour's 'landslide' in 1997, some others of us noticed that Blairism had swept all before it ...with fewer votes than John Major had won in 1992.

Writing in a column following the faked triumphal taking of No 10 Downing Street, (copyright: M.Thatcher), I risked being labelled a right old party-poooper by drawing attention to the declining levels of election turn-outs. I confessed my concern then, long before I had even thought about being an MSP, at the detrimental effects on democracy itself by the politics turn-off on the part of 'the ones that got away', as I described the lost voters.

As a Nationalist, I was concerned that devolution was being oversold and would inevitably disappoint, thus damaging the whole concept of sovereign government being exercised by a Scottish legislature...but I was also concerned that disappointment with a devolved parliament's inability to greatly change economic realities and priorities would diminish people's expectations of and trust in the democratic process itself. This nagging unease about the dangers posed to democracy by opt-outs from the process was present right through the Referendum campaign, (turnout, 60 per cent) and the first Scottish Parliament election (turnout, almost 60per cent). It became quite cool to dismiss politics and political folk as total turn-offs and to wear the admission of not voting as a fashion statement.

We require a more flexible mechanism than the formal structure of a political party to reflect the swift-changing nature of public opinion

It came as quite a surprise to discover that the SNP's so-called bright young things thought me to be an old grouch to be troubled by such trends. Now that I know them more, I understand better why they should be untroubled by the growing gulf between electors and legislators. In common with the superficial post-socialists now running the Labour Party, they have no ideology and have replaced their party's commitment to principles with the belief that, in managing a company, society, economy or country, the end justifies the means.

The result of the SNP's attempt to win favour, first for a "YES YES" vote and then for its candidates in the Scottish Parliament elections, by trying to project itself as more administratively competent than Labour rather than by

setting out its basic, principled demand for sovereign powers, has been to further disenchant electors. The SNP leadership thought Scots wouldn't support sudden, or radical, constitutional change. For the first two years of the parliament's life, the "I" word was never mentioned from the SNP front bench, just as the "S" word never crossed the lips of Executive Ministers. Both lots were scared of frightening voters by appearing to challenge them. Paradoxically, the only party which has grown its membership during the lifetime of the first Parliament has been the SSP.

Surveying the epicenter of our political society from my seat on the outer rim of the Scottish Parliament's debating chamber, I've thought for some time that the phoney war between the Executive and the SNP was probably the best recruitment tool available to Tommy Sheridan. But I'm not tempted to join his crusade against capitalism because I don't support some of the policies, and right now, I think the priority is to win back some of the legions lost to the ballot box. Without their being engaged and feeling a sense of ownership of the democratic process in Scotland, they'll not be persuaded to vote for sovereignty, nor even respect a devolved parliament.

And that's where Independents in the Scottish Parliament come into the big picture. The public mood appears to favour candidates who oppose/challenge the established parties. Across Europe consensual, third way, non-ideological candidates are losing support to individuals without ties to, or patronage from, power-welding party elites. I concluded about two years into this parliament it would do nothing but good to have some genuine Independents to represent in it how people now view politics.

Both putative Executives are managers rather than visionaries. Therefore party discipline is tight ...too tight to allow the Committees the degree of independence that was envisaged before the parliament was elected as the check on Executive power, and the balance in decision-making to reflect public opinion. In a unicameral parliament this puts too much power in the hands of the Executive.

Some Independents, preferably of a similar calibre to Denis Canavan, could fulfill some of the functions of a

second chamber. We have a small body politic, and it's difficult for MSPs to save face if they've boomed, changed their mind or if events conspire to leave them high and dry. Independents can variously act as lightning rods, bridges and jacket-holders...they can also say "NO" to the Executive Whip or the Shadow Whip without being reminded they're volunteering for de-selection.

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Given the gulf between governors and governed I've described above, and accepting that touch-screen technology, the TV zapper and the ubiquitous phone-in militate against the electorate retreating from pick'n'mix support for political policies regardless of their party of origin, we require a more flexible mechanism than the formal structure of a political party to reflect, inside the Parliament, the swift-changing nature of public opinion.

With the exception of absent voters who use the TV zapper to avoid any engagement with political questions or processes, technology makes possible a very fast interchange between voters and their representatives. The same technology also exposes politicians more comprehensively than ever before (think Henry McLeish, Question Time). Unless voters see their

thoughts being articulated on the TV recordings of the Scottish Parliament, their current disillusion will be confirmed. Like it or not, voters are used to microwaving, and they expect the same sort of instant results from political machines that were designed for long, slow cooking. Independent MSPs are unencumbered by rule-books: if the pressure from the public squares with their own analysis and conscience, they're free to act...probably more quickly than parties can, or even should.

A clutch of Independents, to comply with the Scottish Parliament's administrative practices, either acting as a group or as part of a Rainbow Alliance, might be as challenging a prospect as herding cats, but such an eclectic presence might establish the sort of rapport with voters which the present conventional party political arrangement for representation has failed to produce. ■

Margo MacDonald is (currently) an SNP list MSP for the Lothians

ring-fenced democracy

Ann Winning describes how the hope of new local democracy was perverted and suggests how local authority Mafiosi could be broken up

**The best-laid schemes o' mice and men
Gang aft agley
An' lea'e us nought but grief and pain,
For promis'd joy**

Our bard, Rabbie, the man himself, the genius, not even he could have foreseen how profoundly these lines would encapsulate today's 'Scottish Political System'. I remember the day oh so well; the complete joy when the referendum results came flashing at us from our television screens. The optimism was palpable. Scotland had made history. We were a nation full of optimism. We were proud of our courage. The talking point in offices was not the latest soap but our destiny. Politicians of all political parties were congratulating each other. Even the Tories, sworn enemies of devolution, could not ignore the clamour to jump on board the train to success. The people had spoken; now it was up to the politicians to deliver.

When I decided to be part of this history-making machine and declare my intent as a candidate, part of the training made clear that the old Yah Boo system operating in Westminster would be a thing of the past. Cross party decision-making would be the norm. No party would gain over-all control. To their word, Donald Dewar along with Alex Salmond and Jim Wallace campaigned jointly, and born was the body of our modern political structure. Do you remember the vision of Gordon Brown and Sean Connery cuddling? Yep! I thought 'this looks good'. Not all I had hoped but in the right direction. A document to be built on. Certainly a sight better than the local councils which I was used too.

Hot foot I went on the campaign trail. I stood for both Council and Parliament. A new voting system was aired. In addition to the old first past the post rule, proportional representation widely used in many other countries became part of the process. Scotland chose the list system where political parties grade their politicians, one, two etc. The successful candidates top up the first past the post winners. No-one could have foreseen the destructive internal forces within political parties caused by this type of PR system, or you hope not. The outcome of the elections dictated that Labour dominated first past the post. The SNP won the lion's share of list positions with Liberals, Tories and minor parties divvying up the rest.

The scene was set. A Labour/Liberal coalition was formed, although a number of questions tripped off many lips. As a councillor (I had failed in my bid to become an MSP) I considered where Parliament would place itself in the political structure. How councillors would deal with

this perceived new threat. Would the emergence of more women influence the agenda?

Still fuelled with the aphrodisiac of optimism I envisaged a Parliament with a strategic over-view. Ideas flowing from all 'airts and pairts', this new body oozing juicy ideas with ease. In local areas I imagined councils delivering services with a fresh enthusiasm, free from a historically cumbersome bureaucracy and a 'jobs for the boys' reputation.

You might think we were naive but, Oh dear! Oh dear! Hitting the ground with such force was and is painful. For local government it started off so well, with consultation processes fronted by eminent experts Macintosh and Kerley. The outcome; comprehensive documents promoting openness. They detailed new structures for local councils, hand in hand with proper proportional representation thus ridding us of the dreaded 'special responsibility allowance'; a weapon which is used so effectively to whip, maintain discipline and discourage individualism within political groups in local authorities. A modern business framework would emerge to create efficiency with a humane touch encouraging an enthused workforce working corporately for the betterment of the public. Comprehensive budgets controlled, determined and delivered locally, the best outcome for our local communities, as it would be spent where needed.

Sadly, cherry-picking became a commonly used phrase. The reality for councils is catastrophic, with even less power to the backbencher as a result of the emergence of the Executive Committees. No scrutiny of the executive, no real debate, no avenue for free thinking, no meaningful devolved decision-making for local committees and little community participation. In this new world, the use of the word 'democracy' as with the word 'socialism' is discouraged with vigour. Cabals continue, mafia-style organisation is rife.

All is not lost. It could be all turned around with some foresight, courage and trust. Party political factionalism must cease. That does not mean principles should be shelved. One elected member may believe in independence and another have a unionist agenda, but common ground still exists in many areas. In my experience a mother with young children and a brutal husband would not be treated any differently no matter what the political persuasion of the politician. The idea would be to sort out the problem as quickly as possible. If that analogy were correct, would it not be reasonable to draw in as much experience and knowledge in creating a better service to the public and

leave the politics to election times. Of course a judgement must be made and it is not always possible to follow this rule, but common ground that was not exploited is as criminal as not sorting out the problem of the mother.

Public perception would improve. Councillors' would be rewarded by a higher vote turnout and become less defensive because of the constant scrutiny of their expenses. It would also stave off the heightening view that councils should be phased out or disbanded altogether.

The Scottish Parliament should be leading by example, a body of intelligent, highly motivated, community spirited human beings, the political elite of our country. Don't snigger. That is what we should believe. These are our representatives, the people we voted into office who will present our case to the world. The only problem is that they don't believe it. They act like a super council - an expensive one at that - too often meddling in council business, bickering among themselves, with a siege mentality and a parochial attitude.

The idea was to create a parliament that would deal in strategic matters, develop ideas, give Scotland a platform to influence other Governments as well as governing our own country in devolved issues. More women than ever were at the cutting edge of political life bringing a different perspective that enhanced debate. (Good for the Labour party in forcing that agenda.) The public wanted fresh ideas, new initiatives and innovative thinking.

In the Netherlands a Central Planning Bureau was formed after the World War Two, charged with advising government on Strategic Economic Planning. As an example of their work they presented a twenty-five year view on the Dutch economy. The recent debate on the recession in Scotland, which generated much heat but very little light, demonstrated the need for such an analysis to help shape the way forward for our economy, jobs and prosperity. Westminster did not develop such a forum as more often than not Scottish issues were tacked on to the end of normal business. The Scottish Parliament has an ideal opportunity to develop this type of work.

It is not all doom and gloom. Good work has happened. For one the community care plan, an innovative and socially just policy to deal with the needs of an ever-increasing elderly population. Another, the fox hunting ban, first aired in Scotland and now on the Westminster agenda. What I say is, more please!

What is not admirable is hamstringing councils with a 'ring fenced' approach to funding. It is Big Brother with the whip demanding obedience. Councils know their priorities. Council officers, experts in their own field, understand a modern council, and should be responsive to the particular needs of their communities. That is why we have local government.

Other rather sleekit methods, for instance blackmail and bribery, really are not recommended for a legitimate organisation. PFI, or its brother PPP, along with the stock housing transfer initiative are examples of this method, where the carrot is tantalising swung and only presented if the rules are obeyed. Not a good way to run a business. Everyone knows PFI in the long run will cost the taxpayer dear and as for stock transfer, the poor tenant will be asked to stump up when the contractor demands bigger profits.

The way forward is simple. The Scottish Parliament has an obligation to grow up. Spinning, much a bug bare of the Westminster system and duplicated with vengeance in our Parliament, must stop. Tell the truth as it is.

Proportional representation must be reviewed, as the current system allies itself to deals done in smoke filled rooms, hardly democracy in action. An idea floated in some quarters is that the list MSP's should be those in each region who either have the highest share of the vote for second place candidates or requiring the lowest percentage swing to win first past the post. This would require amendments to the Scotland Act but could be enacted to take effect from the 2007 election. This would be democratic and gift the power of election to the electorate rather than small bands of activists - that is real democracy! PR in local government will destroy the one party state, creating a fresh approach and ridding us of a perceived sleaze environment. This hopefully will encourage the voter back to the ballot box.

Scotland's political structures can not come of age until we have proper fiscal autonomy, a policy driven by the SNP but gaining ground across the political divide. Politicians achieving common ground. That is what the public want. Politicians take heed, remember we depend on voter participation. Unfortunately too many old timers still support dinosaur institutions. A modernised structure promised by Mackintosh and Kerley must be established. Never mind the public private partnership schemes, what we need is partnership between the Parliament and local government.

We all want a bright future for Scotland. Our electoral representatives working for mutual benefit can develop the framework that will lead to improvements in our infrastructure, first class public services and a well educated population creating the engine and dynamism for opportunity and prosperity for all who live in this bonny land. "The best-laid schemes o' mice and men, Gang aft aghley"? Go on prove him wrong, be bold; we can produce a Scotland that our heroes past and present and the public would be proud of. ■

SNP Councillor Ann Winning is Leader of the Opposition in South Lanarkshire Council

fixing the machine

Susan Deacon argues that good government is going to need a better civil service

The operation of the civil service in Scotland is perhaps the greatest untold story of the early post devolution period. True, there have been some political and journalistic sideswipes and a few more meaty academic pieces and commentaries along the way. But if there has been a substantive debate about this vital element of the governance of Scotland then I for one have blinked and missed it.

It is striking that during a period where, at times, every action or nuance of politicians – and in particular ministers – has been placed under the microscope of parliamentary and media scrutiny, those who support the machinery of government have continued to swim in a universe somewhere parallel to the goldfish bowl which is now Scottish politics. If we are serious about developing a mature, 21st century democracy in Scotland then this must change. It is time for an open, honest and non-partisan debate about what an effective civil service should look like in a post-devolution Scotland. Time and space does not allow for a detailed historic analysis but let me begin by offering up a few brief observations.

In its century-long existence the former Scottish Office established a unique culture and modus operandus. The fact that the greater part of the two decades leading up to devolution was presided over by a right wing Tory government with no democratic mandate in Scotland is part of that tapestry. This served to cement a climate of defensiveness, an essentially closed culture and a disconnection and lack of trust between the machinery of government and the Scottish public and wider civic society. This was never going to change overnight.

It is self-evident that the creation of a Scottish Parliament would impact dramatically on the operation of the civil service in Scotland. Moving from decades of so-called administrative devolution to a new and untested model of political devolution was never going to be a rapid or easy transition. The question is, therefore, not **if** change is necessary but rather **what** change is required and, crucially, **how** and **when** it will be achieved. Many of us hold to the view that much more could and should have been done to prepare the former Scottish Office for devolution and that the transition itself could have been handled (significantly) better than it was. The energy and effort put into crafting the Scotland Act and to overseeing its passage through Westminster was not matched by a parallel effort to reshape the culture, systems or practices – or to build the capacity – of a government machine to support these new arrangements. Indeed, the internal operations of the Executive arm was conspicuous by its absence in much of the discussion and activity leading up to the creation of the Parliament.

This lack of preparation has contributed to a situation where the machinery of government has visibly struggled to cope – both quantitatively and qualitatively – with the early demands of devolution. This has at times placed inordinate pressures both on civil servants and ministers. Equally, it is fair to say that that no-one could have predicted wholly how devolution would operate in practice. All the more reason, therefore, to take stock now that we have the experience of a first Parliament upon which to draw. Continued complacency at this juncture is in nobody's interest. Indeed papering over the cracks would be downright negligent. Any meaningful debate over the future operation of the civil service in Scotland needs to address two main strands. The first of these is about accountability and the relationship between the civil service and the political process, The second is about management and organisation. In practice, of course, the two are inextricably linked.

There is still a long way to go to build a culture within the Scottish Executive civil service which is truly at ease with the 'new politics' of a devolved Scotland. Of course civil servants are not a homogeneous group. Many individual civil servants – especially some of the 'younger elements' – have sought actively to embrace change. Indeed, many new recruits have consciously chosen the Executive as a career because of a desire to contribute to the fledgling devolution project. Even those more schooled in, and comfortable with, the 'old ways' have had to adapt to the practical reality of having their Ministers ever present and a full-blown Parliament on their doorstep. But change on the scale required will take strong leadership and concerted effort and commitment. There is a difference between pro-active and reactive change and, thus far, what change there has been has been characterised by the latter. So too is there a distinction to be drawn between putting up with politicians and working with them. There remains a tangible reluctance in some quarters of the civil service to relinquish power and influence which de facto lay with Scottish Office civil servants in the days when their political masters were fewer, more remote and considerably less open to scrutiny.

Some (and I stress **some**) civil servants have displayed an ill-concealed irritation at having their views, advice or method of operation challenged by Ministers or Parliamentarians. This is despite the fact that it is elected politicians who are now very directly and visibly held to account for the decisions and outcomes which flow from this process. There have even been several public statements from senior civil servants which have highlighted the inexperience of the new breed of Ministers and Scottish Parliamentarians

as an obstacle to progress. This defensive and even patronising stance is as misleading as it is inappropriate. Firstly, it signals a continued adherence to and deference of the old Westminster/Whitehall ways. The inference is that experience of and compliance with the pre-devolution order is the best way to handle government in a post devolution era. This is, to be generous, at least open to debate. Secondly it seeks to invalidate the experience which the current generation of political leaders possess.

It is a statement of fact that many current and former Ministers possess a range of valuable professional and political experience – indeed many have considerably more direct experience of ‘the front line’ of management and delivery than those who advise them. This tension should be treated as an opportunity not a threat. Self-evidently, any new Minister has much to learn about ‘being in government’ but learning is a two way street. There is much which civil servants can learn from the experience of politicians – both about policy delivery and indeed about the operation of the political process itself. All the more when, by definition, **all** are dealing with a wholly new constitutional arrangement and Parliamentary process.

The senior management of the Scottish Civil Service is still drawn from a small pool of people from a narrow range of professional and personal backgrounds. Crude references to New Club membership and ‘old school ties’ may be over simplistic and jocular but they do have some foundation in fact. So too are there other indicators of the inherent conservatism of Scotland’s civil service. It is significant, for example, that the number of women **ever** to have sat as full members at the top management table in either the Scottish Office or Scottish Executive can be comfortably counted on the fingers of one hand.

Defenders of the status quo will often cite various ‘modernisation’ programmes and other measures designed to widen the composition and perspective of the civil service. True, more appointments are now externally advertised, but this has thus far had little impact on the senior ranks of the organisation. Similarly, the appointment of a number of short term secondees and advisers from other walks of life has helped to bring a fresh perspective to the organisation. But the scale and impact of these changes has been limited and could be argued to be an inadequate proxy for more deep-rooted change within the civil service itself. Many of the long-established old-style Scottish Office and Whitehall practices still prevail. For example, the constant rotation of the generic career civil servant from one Department to another is increasingly anachronistic and has hindered progress in a number of key areas. In an age of modern government, where ‘delivery and change’ are the order of the day, there is a pressing need for greater specialisation and the concentration of expertise. Is it really credible that someone who is in charge of grants to farmers one day is best placed to lead change in our schools the next?

Devolution also requires a fundamental change in the relationship between central government and other delivery agencies. Partnership working is now the order of the day. Yet still there is an over reliance on the issuing of a carefully-crafted 10 page circular produced by a desk-bound civil servant with little or no experience of working in the field as the vehicle to take forward change. Modern government – especially here in Scotland – needs to work in a way and at a pace which is very different from the past. An organisation which is exceptionally bureaucratic and risk -averse and which continues to place a very high value on cumbersome paper-paced process and considerably less on people or project management skills is ill equipped for the job. This is not to suggest that civil servants are bad people or are lacking in ability – far from it. It is simply to recognise that the current arrangement is a bit like asking a plumber to re-wire your house.

Too many of the alleged or perceived failures or shortcomings of the early years of devolution which have been portrayed (often conveniently by opposition politicians) as political failures are in fact the product of administrative and managerial shortcomings. This is not to excuse the politicians, nor to deny that there have been mistakes made by Ministers, both individually and collectively. But it is to recognise that there are inherent weaknesses in how policy commitments are translated into operation by the government machine. Ministers do not want to, and should not have to, micro manage their departments but all too often they are by necessity drawn into this terrain. What has also been hidden from public view is the sheer time and energy which Ministers have had to expend on remedial work; for example rewriting speeches, statements, press releases or Parliamentary questions – not to mention challenging the advice they are given, too much of which has, quite simply, been unfit for purpose.

There is a final strand to the debate which merits mention and that is the relationship between the Scottish civil service and the rest of the British Home Civil Service. There are strong arguments both for and against the status quo and this is by no means the main issue impacting on the efficacy or otherwise of the Scottish civil service at the current time. But if a debate on the future is to be meaningful it must at least ask the question as to whether the time has now come to sever the umbilical chord with Whitehall. The current arrangement looks increasingly anomalous set against the clear political autonomy which now prevails.

These few hundred words are but some brief thoughts and reflections of one erstwhile ‘insider’. If, however, these musings can help catalyse discussion about this much neglected terrain then hopefully the midnight oil which has been burned at my PC will serve some useful purpose. If, however, my comments are met solely with complacency and defensiveness I would simply say, I rest my case. ■

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a question of privilege

David Miller argues that the signs of undue corporate influence on the Scottish Parliament are already visible

It is hard for even jaded cynics not to be amazed at the apparent naivety of the MSPs involved in the Scottish Parliament Business Exchange (SPBE). This is the body which fosters closer connections between MSPs and business, and has been criticised for allowing big business privileged access to the Scottish Parliament. First Margaret Jamieson admits that she has signed a 10 year confidentiality agreement with US drugs giant Pfizer. Then Elaine Thomson was revealed not to have known that the 'lawyer' shadowing her had no legal qualifications, and was in fact a lobbyist working for Saltire Public Affairs, the lobbying subsidiary of law firm Shepherd & Wedderburn. Thomson's failure to even inquire which clients her shadow worked for shows an alarming naivety. She along with four other MSPs is on the board of the SPBE. The thought that it might be abused by lobbyists seems never to have crossed her mind. Fellow MSP and board member David Davidson also exhibited a tenuous grip on the real world of lobbying, saying a lobbyist simply 'gets your message across'. The Exchange by contrast is about 'information exchange and understanding'.

Every PR textbook notes that lobbying is all about 'mutual understanding'. This is a veritable definition of lobbying. Getting ones message across is part of the lobbyists' repertoire, but lobbying also depends crucially on building understanding of procedures and personalities, fostering relationships and on intelligence gathering. Two years ago it was revealed that BP had hired an intelligence firm that spied on Greenpeace in Germany using an undercover infiltrator pretending to be a left wing filmmaker. Yet no-one seems concerned about their lobbyist shadowing Scotland's only Green MSP.

Lobbying is equally concerned with the management of corporate reputation. Pfizer, in common with many other pharmaceutical giants, are adept at controlling information about their activities, but sometimes the truth does leak out. One example revealed in the **Observer** by Greg Palast, is the case of faulty heart valves manufactured by a Pfizer subsidiary. Rather than instruct that they be removed from the market (and from the hearts of patients unlucky enough already to have had one fitted) Pfizer 'ordered the defects to be ground down, which weakened the valves further, but made them look smooth and perfect'. When the valve's break, 'the heart contracts - and explodes. Two-thirds of the victims die, usually in minutes'. When the scientist whose name helped promote the valves discovered this he threatened to go public. A Pfizer executive telexed the scientist: 'ATTN PROF BJORK. WE WOULD PREFER THAT YOU DID NOT PUBLISH THE DATA RELATIVE TO STRUT FRACTURE.' The reason for not publishing?: 'WE EXPECT A FEW MORE.'. According to Palast 800 had exploded by 1998

and 500 people had died. No wonder they wanted Margaret Jamieson to sign a confidentiality agreement.

The participating corporate lobbyists are extremely positive about the SPBE. 'An invaluable insight' says The Saltire lobbyist; 'fascinating and valuable' echoes the man from BP. Nuclear firm British Energy, which has just received a £650 million subsidy, courtesy of the taxpayer, says on its website that the Exchange 'provides great opportunities for Scottish business'. Indeed. However, it is only supposed to allow MSPs to educate themselves about business, rather than provide 'value' and 'opportunities' to big business.

After marvelling at the incredible contortions of MSP defenders of this scheme, we should direct our attention to its progenitors. The SPBE was set-up by the Chief Executive of the Scottish Parliament Paul Grice and the presiding officer David Steel. They have not seen fit to defend the Exchange in the media, but it is their stewardship of the project which raises the most serious questions. Margaret Jamieson may have been naïve, but she assumed that the Exchange had cleared confidentiality agreements. They hadn't, because, as Paul Grice put it at the unofficial launch in June 2001, "a strong guiding principle... is that we should set the Exchange up with a minimum of rules and regulations". This failure to police the conduct of the corporations involved has led predictably to the current fiasco. David Steel too has been unusually silent. He was more expansive at the unofficial launch. In an agreeably chummy get together he described to the assembled MSPs and corporate lobbyists his ambition for the Exchange "to go deeper than just a few days of junketing - no, that's not the right word [laughter from audience] - the few days of mutually beneficial contact". Steel also noted that the Exchange had "broadened out beyond just business and industry and into all community organisations of every kind". This has turned out to be false. Five of the eight participants are from multinational corporations and one is a commercial lobbyist representing multinationals; the other two represent enterprise quangos.

Defending the Exchange before the Standards committee recently Grice rejected criticism of his pet project. He claimed that the undertaking by participants not to lobby is a sufficient safeguard, despite any clear definition of what lobbying might entail. In fact, Grice is on record recommending the lack of rules and regulations as a positive feature of the Exchange. As lobbying is the full time function of the Exchange's corporate members it is rather like suggesting that a fox can shadow the chicken house so long as it acts like a mouse. Grice's defence required him to dissemble in the worst

traditions of Sir Humphrey and the British civil service. In the Grice lexicon words can apparently be stretched to mean the opposite of their dictionary definition. The Exchange does not allow privileged access to big business because "The rules of the Exchange give the members safeguards so that they can have a constructive exchange. There is no privileged access **in any sense of the word**" (my emphasis). But the fact is that the scheme is dominated by multinationals and that there is no comparable access to MSPs (up to 26 days a year or a day a fortnight) for any other interests. The Oxford English Dictionary lists the following synonyms for privileged: favoured, advantaged, indulged, special. Readers can judge for themselves which of these senses apply to the scheme.

On the question of openness Grice noted that "The MSPs **knew exactly whom they were dealing with**. We put a press notice out saying who the people were. **In no sense** was anything hidden. That openness is another safeguard" (my emphasis). A press notice there certainly was, but it noted only that Fiona Burns was a 'policy adviser' at Shepherd & Wedderburn the law firm. Actually, she works for Saltire Public Affairs, its the lobbying subsidiary. Such lack of transparency is par for the course in the world of lobbying, but it is worrying that the Chief Executive feels the need to endorse the lobbyists slippery use of language. Moreover the MSP involved in the exchange, Elaine Thomson, who also sits on the board of the SPBE, appeared to be slightly less than 'exactly' aware of who she was dealing with. Here is what she said to **Newsnight**:

Elaine Thomson MSP: One of the things that was done when the inward Parliament programme was organised was that all the names, positions and companies of those involved were all published and was quite open.

Gordon Brewer (Newsnight): So you were aware that this woman was not a lawyer, but in fact worked for a division of Shepherd and Wedderburn, which from what it says about itself looks very much like a lobbying company?

ET: It's a company that deals in information and it is the public affairs arm of that company. I mean the individual in question is professionally, as I understand it, a solicitor, though she is currently employed in the public...

GB: She isn't actually.

ET: Isn't she?

GB: We asked the company today and they said she has no legal training.

ET: Right... I thought she was professionally qualified but obviously I should have read her CV a little more effectively. [7 October 2002]

Again, readers can judge for themselves the extent to which this MSP knew 'exactly' with whom she was dealing.

The affair needs to be seen in a broader context. Most observers (on the left and the right) agree that the power

of business has increased in the last two decades. Many suggest that this means a diminution of, if not abolition of, the nation state. One of Blair's admirer's talks of replacing it with the 'Market State'. All over the world we are seeing business take a greater role in governance. There are a myriad of corporate front groups and 'partnership' schemes set up to pursue the interests of Trans-National Corporations. From this perspective the SPBE is simply the local face of a wider global trend. Both the EU and the UN have similar partnership arrangements with big business. The UN's 'global compact' for example allows corporations to use the credibility (and the logo) of the UN in exchange for non-binding pledges to improve their human rights and sustainability activities. At the Johannesburg Summit earlier this year environmentalists condemned the Global Compact for the respectability it gave to companies, some of which (including the oil and pharmaceutical industries) continue to engage in unsustainable practices. The relevance of this for Scotland is that the developing relationships between government and big business across the globe are finding local expression in Holyrood. Was this the purpose of devolution?

Some are now arguing that the SPBE should be brought under the control of the standards committee and that is surely right, but it is not certain that this would stop the Exchange functioning as a means for multinationals to gain privileged access to the Parliament. The current standards committee proposals to register lobbyists would not affect five of the six lobbyists in question because they work inside companies and are specifically exempt from the register, which is aimed only at commercial consultants. This is, as standards convenor Mike Rumbles has said, a 'structural' problem. The only alternative to abolishing the Exchange is to radically alter its functions and ethos. If it is to give MSPs experience of the 'real world' in which most Scots live then they must be able to visit small business, the public sector, charities and pressure groups. What chance of MSPs 'shadowing' Greenpeace 'actions' or living with the homeless on the streets for a week, in order to build 'mutual understanding'?

The SPBE affair certainly shows that there is a need for some Scottish Parliamentarians (and their officials) to learn more about business. But if they are to guarantee their independence and credibility they must demonstrate they are not just receiving one side of the story. Otherwise there is a danger of MSPs complying with a corporate agenda for Scotland, the very opposite of the promised rhetoric of a new open and accountable system of government. Remember, it was the business community that was most hostile to the democratic movement that delivered devolution. As things stand the Exchange promotes an ideal atmosphere not for education **about** business but for education **by** business. In a word - lobbying. ■

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who shot henry?

An anonymous writer asks if the downfall of Henry McLeish might have more to do with his challenge of vested interests than with his pursuit by the media

Two obvious statements: the burst of legislative creativity in the Scottish Parliament has stopped and Monica Lewinsky had some pretty odd friends. But why would you find these statements in the same sentence? Well, firstly, because in both cases hardly anybody has really stopped to ask why. And secondly, because if you do stop and ask why the answers seem to lead in worryingly similar direction.

Let's start with Lewinsky. The bizarre (almost surreal) cast of supporting characters in her affair should have caused real concern. Why were a motley group of ex-intelligence service operatives rushing to become best friends with a slightly flaky and clearly obsessive intern? Or rather, who sent them? The politically significant question was not whether Clinton was prone to risky casual sex but who was behind an operation which aimed not just to remove him from power but to destroy him. Sure, the Republicans were delighted, but their role was secondary. Clinton had offended some powerful vested interests - the abortive Medicare proposals are among those that may have been suicidal - and a message had to be sent that would deter anyone else from trying the same. It has been argued that the relentless pursuit of Clinton can best be understood as a sort of severed horse's head for the bed of America's progressive politicians.

But this is Scotland. We are used to everyday backstabbing, but we don't really face 'sinister' American-style. We know that hostile elements of the media are eager to weave a series of minor incidents into a cloak of suspicion to undermine a democratic institution they despise; at least that is in the open. But is that enough to explain the Henry McLeish affair? Were the Tories and the media the initiators, or were they the tools?

There are reasons to ask this question. If you were asked to defend the legislative record of the Scottish Parliament there are a range of initiatives you would probably highlight. These would almost certainly include (if you are left-leaning) the abolition of tuition fees, the abolition of warrant sales, the banning of fox hunting, the introduction of a fairer pay regime for schoolteachers and free care for the elderly. All of these things have a strong link with Henry McLeish, either in his capacities as Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong learning or as First Minister. In addition there were a number of initiatives he began which Jack McConnell quickly killed off when he took charge - a solo bid for Euro 2008, a stronger role for Scotland

in Europe, a ban on smacking young children. Frankly, almost everything worthwhile the Parliament has done is, to greater or lesser extent, related to Henry.

So we should all have been grateful, right? Of course not. Scotland is a small country, and our politicians are too close. We have a proportional voting system but an absolutist state of mind. The concept that a good idea could emerge from an opposing political party is alien to Scotland right now, especially in a Scottish Labour Party which is seeing the first real threat to its hegemony in 50 years. Tuition fee abolition pains Labour because it was popular but the credit does not rest with them. Public Service Trusts are to be feared because they are labour with a small 'L' but SNP with a capital 'S'. Right from his time as the Chair of the Consultative Steering Group on the establishment of the Scottish Parliament Henry was too willing to work across party lines. He gave an increasingly paranoid Labour group too many reasons to be paranoid, and this lost him the local support which might have saved him.

But that is probably not what finished Henry off. His real crime was to deeply offend some powerful interests in the south. Too much of the Henry-effect made life that little bit less comfortable for a deeply unambitious Westminster administration. Labour in Westminster knew that the abolition of tuition fees would be very popular with England's middle classes. They knew that the McCrone settlement was going to be very popular with the public sector and was going to put pressure on pay settlements for teachers in England and Wales. The other things were just too ambitious for Scotland or looked too progressive. Then of course there was that little slip; you don't call John Reid a "patronising bastard" if you want to keep in with the inner circle.

However, Henry might have survived even these if it hadn't been for his fatal 'mistake'. Nobody should underestimate how furious London was over the introduction of free care for the elderly. On the other issues, McLeish had the fallback of a Parliament without majorities. The alternatives to a compromise on tuition fees or warrant sales was potentially worse, but the Sutherland report was a UK-wide issue which Blair and Brown were desperately trying to keep the lid on. They had put placemen on the Committee to stymie it, they had spun and briefed, they had whipped their own party, and then - under no real pressure - Henry just decided it was the right thing to do.

He could probably have rode a rejection of the Sutherland proposals out in Parliament, but he chose not to. London was incandescent. There was, and is, a real risk that the English middle classes are going to start to question the Blair doctrine that anything he hasn't already done is impossible. Blair is quick to proclaim the unaffordability of most social programmes, but what happens when a close neighbour proves otherwise? The pretty limited Scottish experiments in social renewal are a big threat to Blair. And, crucially, to the man who holds the purse strings.

If McLeish was a ritual sacrifice for the benefit of any over-ambitious devolved administration in Britain, might Gordon Brown be the vengeful force nodding across the playground to all Scotland's potential First Ministers saying "See whit ah did tae Henry? Dae ye understand?" It is unlikely that the real lines of responsibility for Henry's downfall will ever be known. There are so many feuds and disagreements in the Labour Party that it could all have started from many sources. What looks certain is that too much of the evidence which sunk McLeish seemed to emerge from the inside. Perhaps those who wanted McLeish sleeping with the fishes sat down, decided that they were going to precipitate it and started feeding the information out. The key players would certainly have known where the bodies are buried (given that they buried many of them personally). Or maybe they saw the affair emerge from elsewhere and decided that this was the opportunity. Either way, it doesn't matter much.

There is undoubtedly motive, opportunity and circumstantial evidence. In the nature of these things you rarely find a smoking gun, but the treatment of Henry McLeish by the hierarchy in the Labour Party comes pretty close. What is absolutely clear is that virtually nothing was done by the Labour hierarchy to save Henry. Compare Henry McLeish's fate with that of John Reid. Henry - not alone among Labour politicians in Scotland - was involved in a little sweetheart deal. It might have raised questions about Henry's integrity, but it did not in any way pervert the course of Parliamentary democracy. John Reid, on the other hand, was officially censured by the Standards Commissioner of the House of Commons for attempting to cover up, intimidate and bully to prevent her fairly investigating serious allegations made against him. John Reid's actions had a meaningful and harmful effect on the

democratic process in Britain. Yet, while Henry looks for a job from out of the crumbled ruins of his professional life, John Reid has been promoted and promoted unblemished. While Henry was hung out to dry, John Reid was saved Berlusconi-style by a brazen disregard for justice and the prompt sacking of anyone who sought to hold him to account. (Incidentally, a prediction: Jack McConnell will survive the current scandals surrounding him, not just because they are the minor stuff of local feuds, but because in the cosmology of New Labour Jack is obedient.)

The persecution of Henry needed an extraordinary single-mindedness, a deep streak of ruthlessness, a consuming belief in the righteousness of the cause, a steely and determined intelligence and a phenomenal amount of power in the given pond. If you were writing the character, he would be a brooding Calvinist with dark and slightly manic eyes. A more powerful variation on Hogg's Justified Sinner. A Gordon Brown.

Of course London will seek to control Scotland - that is the natural order of things in the politics of the modern world. Of course there have always been feuds and dirty tricks in all politics everywhere. And of course, just like Clinton, you had better be more powerful than the vested interests you take on if you are to survive. It is too late to save America from the dark forces which stroll around in the shadows, but it is not too late to save Scotland.

These words are written with incredulity, but we are paying the price for our collective failure to save Henry and his attempts to do something worthwhile, and that price is government by a man who's doctrine has been pared down from "do less, better" to a simple "do less". Union Jack McConnell, a man who has made a sulphurous pact with a dark-eyed stranger promising that, in return for the mothballing of government in Scotland to protect a neighbouring plutocracy, he will be permitted to survive.

We must not allow self-interested and sinister attempts to control Scotland to stifle our attempts to improve our society. We are suspicious enough of politicians, but we must be more suspicious of what we read about them than we are. It is our collective duty to recognise that things happen for a reason. Henry made mistakes, but they may not be the ones that most of Scotland assumes. His mistake might have been to want a better Scotland. ■

Might Gordon Brown be the vengeful force nodding across the playground to all Scotland's potential First Ministers saying "See whit ah did tae Henry? Dae ye understand?"

saving labour

Steven Birrell discusses whether the ideological control of Scottish Labour by New Labour has left any space for the left in the party

With the polls predicting significant gains for the SSP at next year's Scottish Parliament elections and Tony Benn speaking to sell-out audiences (about his refusal to 'sell-out') it suggests that socialism is in vogue. But what about within the Scottish Labour Party, the organisation most would traditionally consider to be the natural home of the left in Scotland? In the first issue of SLR, Jimmy Reid argued "If Scottish Labour can't be reclaimed for socialism and social democracy then a realignment of the left in Scotland is inevitable". As the first term of the new Parliament nears its end, are we in better position to offer a more definitive assessment of Reid's statement? Does Scottish Labour provide an adequate platform for the articulation of left-wing politics and if not, what are the alternatives?

The candidate selection process employed by the party for the Scottish Parliament elections was, at the time, one of the most controversial events and talking points within Scottish politics. Much has been made of the so called 'ideological cull' designed to root out the 'lefties', 'nats' and those deemed unsympathetic to the New Labour project, keeping them off the Approved List. The validity of such a claim has been discussed at length already. Needless to say that a considerable number of prominent figures from the left such as John McAllion, Cathy Jamieson and other members of the Campaign for Socialism made it on to the list and into Parliament in sufficient numbers as to make their presence felt on the Mound.

The most memorable occasion of them doing so, came during the debate and vote on Tommy Sheridan's Private Members Bill calling for the abolition of poindings and warrant sales. This event will be remembered as one of the defining moments of the inaugural Parliament. For not only was it the first example of the Parliament imposing its will on the Executive (something of a rarity in modern day politics), it was the first time the Labour backbenches publicly challenged the leadership with MSPs such as Johann Lamont emphasising their left wing credentials in an emotive debate. It was argued that constituents would not forgive their elected Labour representatives for failing to support the principles of Sheridan's bill and perhaps some would not have forgiven themselves.

However, there was to be no repeat performance when another of Sheridan's bills, advocating the introduction of universal free school meals, came before the Parliament. Despite being an issue that one might expect to find some support on the Labour benches, only McAllion and Elaine Smith voted in favour of it. This episode no doubt reinforced what these individuals may have concluded

already; that some of their closest political allies are situated across the chamber, outwith their own party. If further evidence was required, then it can be found by looking the events leading up to Jack McConnell's anointment as parliamentary group leader following Henry McLeish's resignation. Here, two candidates from the left, McAllion and Malcolm Chisholm (who has been described as 'moderate left' or 'soft left') both expressed an interest in standing for the leadership, yet neither could secure the seven nominations from their fellow MSPs that were required in order to be considered. Under the present rules, these parliamentarians have an effective monopoly over the nominations process and can act as 'gatekeepers' - deciding who can and cannot be considered for the post. Despite, more than seven MSPs claiming membership of the Campaign for Socialism, McAllion could only secure the backing of one of them, Elaine Smith. When interviewed on his leadership bid and quest for nominations in a radio interviewer, McAllion admitted, "I'm finding it hard to find friends at the moment" and conceded that 'colleagues' rather than 'friends' was a more appropriate description of his peers.

If McAllion's failure was somewhat predictable, the same could not be said for Chisholm's. When his intention to stand was first announced, it seemed inconceivable that he would be unable to progress beyond the nominations stage. Let us be clear on one thing. It is up to the individual MSP to decide who to endorse and they are under no obligation to offer a range of candidates to the 'selectorate'. However, it does seem puzzling that an individual such as Chisholm is considered capable of holding one of the most demanding ministerial positions in the Scottish Executive (more of which later), yet is somehow deemed not good enough to be considered for the leadership.

The decision not to back either Chisholm or McAllion effectively denied the wider party and affiliated members the opportunity to have a formal role in the selection of the new leader. Had Wendy Alexander, the only other candidate apparently capable of acquiring the nominations chose to stand, the party would have been faced with the ideological equivalent of choosing between a green penguin biscuit and a blue penguin biscuit: same product, different packaging. Had a candidate from the left been allowed to challenge McConnell, the selectorate would have been offered a choice of policy programmes rather than simply a choice of personalities. Writer and commentator Gerry Hassan argues that the reason a candidate from the left did not stand was because the Campaign for Socialism realised he/she would poll a

'derisory' share of the vote (presumably no one told McAllion or the other Campaign for Socialism members outwith the parliamentary group!). Although neither of the aforementioned individuals was likely to pose a serious threat to McConnell, the proposed system would have involved a potential selectorate of 400,000 and Lesley Riddoch predicted that Chisholm would have acquired a "sizeable chunk of lefty vote".

Perhaps more importantly, a contest involving these individuals would have allowed the party to have a debate on key policy issues such as Public Private Partnerships (PPP) - a debate which many grassroots members believe has taken place in their absence behind closed doors. A candidate from the left may have provided members with an alternative set of policy proposals and the leadership contest would have allowed them to be heard, debated and voted upon. There are those that will argue that rather than simply choosing between policy programmes, the role of the individual member is now far greater. The Scottish Policy Forum, created as part of the Partnership in Power reforms, gives members the opportunity to enjoy a formal role in the formulating of party policy. Whilst 11,000 members are reported to have taken part so far, the most obvious concern is the apparent restrictions on what can be discussed at forum meetings. According to one member close to the process, every time the issue of PPP was raised at either a Health or Education forum, the participants were told that this was not appropriate on the grounds that it was a "finance issue". Surely a party's proposals for how they intend to pay for and provide public services is a fundamental part of any Health or Education programme?

Those extolling the success of the left within the parliamentary party point to the anointing of Jamieson as Deputy Leader and the appointment of both herself and Chisholm as Education Minister and Health Minister respectively as well as policies such as free personal care for the elderly. Indeed these appointments led one commentator to conclude that this signified McConnell's 'surge to the left'. The difficulty for the left here is that both individuals, it could be argued, have become part of the 'establishment' and ruling elite. Chisholm has gone on record as saying he has "serious reservations about PFI". As Mike Watson has recently found to his cost, it is difficult to reconcile personal beliefs and those of his constituents with his ministerial role and the principle of collective responsibility that comes with it. If McConnell and the Scottish Executive decide that PPP is to become a cornerstone of public service provision, then it will be Jamieson and Chisholm's job as Ministers to oversee its implementation and more importantly, publicly support it.

Some political parties have been described as 'broad churches' capable of accommodating a wide range of beliefs, opinions and ideas under one banner. However, there are doubtless those on the Labour left who can no

longer relate to the message being delivered, who have become disillusioned with the sermons and who refuse to sing from the same hymn sheet. The question for these people is where to go from here? In a forthcoming article to be published in Citizen (the Campaign for Socialism journal), Vince Mills outlines several options including joining the SSP or creating a new party. Defecting to the SSP appears to be most obvious of the two but whilst the party may provide a natural refuge to disillusioned Labour (and SNP) members and voters, not all are convinced that the SSP represents the future of left-wing politics in Scotland. Academics and commentators acknowledge that the SSP is 'growing up' as a political party and has become more than simply a protest vehicle within the Scottish party system. Yet, critics have pointed to the factionalism, extreme elements and an inability to explain the transition from capitalism to socialism as reasons for not signing up whilst pointing out that the only poll that counts is the one held on May 6th next year. This time four years ago, the some opinion polls had Labour and the SNP neck and neck with others pointing to the SNP being the majority party. Only time will tell whether the SSP can make a significant breakthrough with several MSPs, allowing the party to distance itself from the claim that it is essentially a one-man band.

One might also consider resorting to membership and participation in one of the growing number of single-issue organisations such as that created in Dunfermline to campaign against the down-grading of the Queen Margaret Hospital. The group has generated considerable publicity and interest in the issue amongst the local population in an attempt to force Chisholm to intervene and maintain emergency services at the QM. It has also considered the possibility of standing candidates in next year's election and one would be wary of dismissing their chances given what happened in 2001 in Wyre Forest. It remains to be seen whether or not this sort of activism is more effective in delivering change than inter-party methods.

Finally, Mills offers a third route (and his own preference) for disillusioned members of the left: to remain within the party and advance the causes of socialism. He argues "the socialist left need to simultaneously win Labour Party members to socialism and socialists to the Labour Party. We need to be active in and beyond the Labour Party". The first steps towards achieving these aims have already been taken with the Campaign for Socialism joining forces with the Socialist Campaign Group in order to organise a conference entitled After New Labour (Scotland), which took place on the 26 October. It has been billed as a "major event signalling a new beginning for Labour's Scottish Left". However, the conference may also represent its final roll of the dice in order to find a voice in the modern day Scottish Labour Party. ■

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a gentlemen's agreement

Henry McCubbin argues that the Speculative Society affair shows that taken-for-granted networks may exert more control over political and judicial life in Scotland than many assume

There is a great deal of talk at this moment over the possible loss of editorial diversity amongst the broadsheet titles in Scotland. Diversity, we are told, leads to competition for scoops, and this in turn ensures that it is difficult for the workings of the powerful elites in our society to remain hidden for long. How then can it be explained that the workings of a secretive society, whose web of membership links some of Scotland's most powerful legal personalities, first appeared in the Guardian?

On Friday August 16, 2002 George Monbiot wrote a story *The Skye Bridge Club. Is an elite secret society undermining the impartiality of Scottish justice?* A rather remarkable tale ensued with regards to the trials and tribulations of the doughty group of campaigners against Scotland's first and costly PFI project, the Skye Bridge and its overpriced tolls. Monbiot's reference for his information was Robbie the Pict who has been at the forefront of the anti-toll campaign. George had a particular interest in this story as it had featured large in his book **Captive State: the Corporate Takeover of Britain**. What Robbie had now handed him was an incredible story of how many of the major legal players in this saga were not only members of that exclusive club, the Scottish Bar, but also members of an even more exclusive club for the legal establishment plus a few of their corporate friends, The Speculative Society.

The story goes back further, however, for in the past months a dossier has been circulating, signed 'Edinburgh Advocate', highlighting the concerns of Tom Minogue. Tom describes himself as an ordinary working man who after working for several employers in the engineering sector set up his own company. At one point, however, he came up against the law and the deeply entrenched Masonic element both within the police and the judiciary. In defending his innocence Mr Minogue asked if a sheriff dealing with his case had Masonic links to which he was given a discretionary assurance. His experience of this action led to him placing a petition before the Scottish Parliament concerned with Masonic influence within the Scottish justice system, primarily in the police and the judiciary.

Whilst researching for this petition the dogged Mr Minogue had his attention drawn to the Speculative Society, or the Spec. Many, if not most, of Scotland's senior judiciary are said to be members of what is ostensibly a debating club meeting in Edinburgh University's Old College. This club gained notoriety for continuing to exclude women, an issue which received some publicity a year or two

ago. But Minogue's digging led to further linkages where members of this particular society appeared along the judicial sequences of some highly publicised trials. Perhaps the most internationally notorious trial being that of the Lockerbie bombers and the surprising IPO (International Progress Organization) report dateline Vienna, 23 August 2002:

In a statement issued today, Professor Hans Koechler, President of the International Progress Organisation, called upon the Scottish judicial authorities to undertake a fresh investigation into the bombing of the Pan Am jet over Lockerbie in 1988. Professor Koechler - who acted as international observer at the Scottish Court in the Netherlands by nomination of the Secretary-General of the United Nations - further renewed his call for an independent public inquiry into the entire Lockerbie case and the handling of the case by the Scottish and British authorities.

The revelations published in the British newspaper *The Guardian* (16 August 2002) and in the *Sunday Herald*, Glasgow (18 August 2002) about the membership of many people of the legal establishment of Scotland in the so-called Speculative Society, a group of "friends" dating back to the 18th century, that keeps membership secret - similar to Masonic traditions. According to names leaked to the media, a considerable number of the protagonists of the Lockerbie trial (from the panel of judges and from the prosecution and defense teams) supposedly belong to this group, which raises questions in regard to fairness and impartiality of the proceedings as required under Article 6 the European Human Rights Convention.

The fact that *The Guardian* ran a story based on the dossier claiming that the society is undermining Scottish justice forced the Scottish press to react. Monbiot's particular reason for pressing the story was undoubtedly because many of the judges hearing the succession of cases arising from the non-payment of Skye Road Bridge tolls are members of the Spec. So was the then Minister of Transport, Lord James Douglas-Hamilton, whose decision was being challenged before the courts, as was a senior civil servant in charge of the project and, would you believe it, was the Chairman of the Skye Bridge Company which collects the tolls. No conflict of interests there then.

Some members of the Scottish legal profession are themselves taking a renewed interest in the Spec. The

September edition of SCOLAG, a Scottish legal journal, had and editorial on the Spec in which they described it thus:

“But it is not clear that the Speculative Society is a major threat. From our observations at Edinburgh’s Old College the Speculative Society meetings are, in the main, reactionary gatherings of over-privileged, idiot, boy students who enjoy pompous role-playing. In this guise it is no more a threat to democracy and justice than other self-indulgent antics found among a minority of “yah” students at many universities.”

Never heard of Adam Smith obviously who memorably wrote “People of the same trade seldom meet together, even for merriment and diversion, but the conversation ends in a conspiracy against the public, or in some contrivance to raise prices.”

However SCOLAG does go on to say:

“But concern is focused on ‘extraordinary members’, who generally do not attend debates. These include, in the House of Lords, Lord Hope of Craighead, Lord Clyde, Lord Mackay of Clashfern, Lord Jauncey, Lord Keith and Lord Cameron of Lochbroom; in Scotland, The Lord Justice General and Lords Marnock, Hamilton, Prosser, Milligan. Coulsfield, Maclean, Osbourne. Abemethy, Johnston and Nimmu Smith, along with many advocates and Sheriffs. Other members of the judiciary may belong the Society; the only thing for certain is that Lady Cosgrove and Lady Smith are not Speculators. Barred for not being male. Despite excluding women judges the Spec does seem to bring together a very high proportion of Scotland’s judiciary.”

I believe that Tom Minogue is right to pursue his petition and judging by the recent noises emanating from the Scottish Parliament membership of such organisations by people holding public office may soon have to be declared. This, however, still leaves us with a problem that has troubled the left for some considerable time and the above happenings have brought it into focus. We now have a recognisable state in Scotland part nationally controlled. On the one hand we have the Marxist relationship between class and the state; on the other we need to evaluate the prevailing neo-liberal view of the state and society and assess the composition of the Scottish state of today. The above tale of the legal profession lifts a corner that allows us to peer beneath the surface and view some of the informal linkages that mobilise bias toward a particular world view.

New Labour is totally in thrall to the view that posits the state as a neutral referee adjudicating between competing interests in society. However, if you concede that in contemporary Western societies there is a dominant or ruling class which owns and controls the means of production and that the dominant class has close links to powerful institutions, political parties, the military, universities, the media, etc; that it has disproportionate representation at all levels of the state apparatus, especially in the command positions’ and the legal profession then the state becomes an arm of that class.

Ralph Miliband contended that the capitalist class is highly cohesive and constitutes a formidable constraint on Western governments and state institutions, ensuring that they remain instruments for the domination of society’. However, he insisted that in order to be politically effective, the state must be able to separate itself routinely from ruling-class factions. Government policy may even be directed against the short-run interest of the capitalist class. He was also quick to point out that under exceptional circumstances the state can achieve a high order of independence from class interests, for example, in national crises and war.

But this position, which one could readily accept after the recent revelations of the Spec, was challenged in a celebrated debate between Miliband and Nicos Poulantzas who rejected the subjective notion of exploring the relation among classes, bureaucracy, and the state through interpersonal relations. Much more important for Poulantzas was the structural components of the capitalist state which lead it to protect the long-term framework of capitalist production even if this meant severe conflict with some segments of the capitalist class.

In order to grasp these structural components, it is essential, Poulantzas argued, to understand that the state is the unifying element in capitalism. More specifically, the state must function to ensure the ‘political organisation’ of the dominant class. In other words, the state must function to guarantee long term capital accumulation. It is at this point we open up the argument as to whether following the neo liberal nostrums of the Washington Consensus, e.g. privatisation, PFI, PPP etc., present day neo liberal governments like ours are protecting long term accumulation or bowing to short term shareholder demands. But this is a different speculative society from the one I started with. ■

Henry McCubbin is a former Labour MEP

transforismo

A review of Tom Nairn's *Pariah: Misfortunes of the British Kingdom* by Andrew Noble. Verso, 2002, £13.

Irish and more recent Australian absence has not made Tom Nairn her grow finder. The history of the nostalgia for British greatness is, for him, the fundamental enabling vice for the metastasis of the British body politic under Thatcher and her filial successor Blair. As one of our few truly intellectual political analysts, Nairn has always stressed a compelling need for radical, republican restructuring of the British State which he perceived as not only inappropriate to our increasingly distant post-imperial condition but profoundly dangerous to our economic and political well-being. The rage which fuels this short polemic is that of a man who has seen his hopes thwarted to an extent that he believes Britain is terminally ill. The 'parodic' reality to past and present he sees under Blair is akin to an increasingly manic dance of the death of democracy.

For Nairn the election of 2001 was an apocalyptic moment in our history. Delayed by the funeral pyres of foot and mouth carcasses, New Labour's mutedly triumphalist entry into its second term was achieved not only because of the collapse of a viable opposition, a shivering, naked Tory party with all its clothes stolen, but as a result of the ever expanding growth of The Apathy Party. Given, as we now see, the absolute necessity in British politics for the corrective pressure of an opposing potential government, we now seem to be in the position of a one party government to which there is no end in sight. Thus the increasingly gross failures and abuses that mark every aspect of British institutional life lead to the constant downfall of impossibly briefed individual ministers but to no governmental change. Blair's constant rant and cant of modernisation is accompanied by a total lack of serious analysis of the reason what British society cannot structurally and technologically innovate in any area. Cool Britannia is pastiche.

What Nairn's analysis partly lacks - the nature and consequences of 9/11 is not really felt in the book - is the degree to which this allegedly resurrected Great Britain is dependent both in style and substance on America where, sadly, Nairn's republican beliefs have not assured a healthy democracy. New Labour's adoption by way of its most representative figure and political guru Peter Mandelson of Clinton's vote winning triangular tactics was the beginning of a certainly sorry and perhaps globally tragic tale. Hence the accelerated economic policy of privatisation whose purpose is to make the world safe for corporate, mainly American, profits. Brown, the

man who single-handedly terminated boom and bust, has as yet been surfing on a huge Wall Street-inspired high-tech bubble. What Nairn identifies in Brown, Thatcher and Blair is a pronounced megalomania

Which, in the absence of genuine British power, has, of necessity, to plug itself into America in both economic and military terms.

Thus it is that the Churchill/Roosevelt axis is seen as an eternal archetype and template with the combined forces of the Anglo-American democracies endlessly routing those of fascist evil. Everybody should read Christopher Hitchens' early book when, pre-9/11 and his metamorphosis into warrior king, he wrote an inspired account of the true history of Anglo-American racialism, *Blood, Class, Nostalgia*. This history includes as one of its darkest passages the bombing of Arab countries, some of it with poison gas, in the pursuit of domination of Middle East oil fields. In some insanely logical fashion the British Labour party is in the hands of a man who combines, precisely like the American Right, evangelical moral certitude with a not very covert capacity for unleashing violence. With Bush he is sowing the dragon's teeth of a terrible century; the alleged moderniser is in the grip of tribal energies of which he is seemingly barely conscious. As Mark Twain frequently remarked, in the history of imperial genocide in furtherance of commercial advantage, the Anglo-Americans were in the van.

If he is short on our foreign policy, Nairn is lucid in his understanding of our racialism in relation to our non-white, population. He is also deeply perceptive in his analysis of New Labour's fashioning itself to Middle England and the consequences of this to devolution. Alert to Gordon Brown's singular role in fashioning the Scottish Labour Party into the thing it is today, largely shorn of experience, intelligence and integrity, he also perceives, given his economic triumphs, a greater role for Brown:

Brown's centrality to the Project is the way that he (unlike Blair) conjoins a smartly ignominious broad strategy with deep sensitivity to the needs of his party Mafiosi. Unlike Blair, he is a 'man of the party' as well as of the Union. The steeds of the Undead come together naturally in his reins. Could there be a better leader of reaction, once Project-impetus has slackened, resources have to be mobilised and enemies rounded upon?

This is a deeply alarming book. It should be read as

a wake up-call to a somnambulant society which is arguably sleepwalking in civil and foreign affairs it knows not where.

Towards the end of the book Nairn, however, does have a Shelley-like anticipation that the darkest moment is just before the dawn. Or that the light at the end of the tunnel may not be an oncoming train;

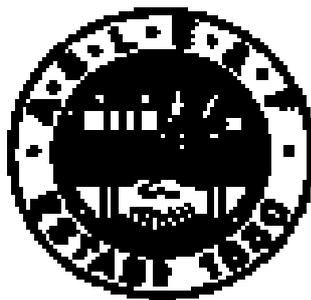
I suggested earlier that the 'break-up of the archipelago could have been a future-oriented exercises 'test-bed' of emancipation from fossil-sovereignty, providential obsession and the abscesses of racialism. And such a Britain might have been a more modest and marginal model of change - somewhere in the same spectrum as the Baltic states, the Low Countries, South Africa and parts of Latin America. Prominent in Goran Therborn's 'decent periphery' as it were, rather than a pivot and First Lieutenant of Freedom. However, Blair's New Labour only flirted coyly with such notions then scuttled back into the bunker of Greatness whenever the dust of the ornaments was disturbed. Only with the coming collapse of the bunker itself is some successor likely to take reform more seriously.

Darkened by memories of the '30s, specifically Thomas Plann's sinisterly prophetic 1929 story, Mario the Magician, Nairn is haunted by the British one party state. For Nairn our hypnotically performing Mario is Blair. Pre-1997 Blair was a PR man's dream candidate. At worst, despite my own visceral antipathy, he seemed the sort of bloke who, if not offering a chicken in every pot, seemed

to offering the nation a healthy, if Islington-Lite, diet. His present reincarnation for Nairn as Antonio Mussolini is of a darker realm of being. He is, of course, precisely the sort of leader which, in Nairn's prognosis, a society as distempered as ours would throw up. Thus Nairn on our electoral degeneration and how this evolved from Thatcher to where we are now:

...lethal electoralism, adversarialism, surrogate elitism, the absence of pluralism, an unwritten constitution, a 'Court politics' which entailed that 'only national office is worth gaining; losing office-elections means the political wilderness'. These were diagnoses influenced by Thatcher's government of the 1980s, but they were also looking backwards rather than forwards. In effect, they were perceiving a traditional state-order in the earlier stages of derangement. Decline had begun to mutate into something worse, but it was not yet clear what the further shore would be like. Now we are stranded on it, and can hardly help knowing better. 'The legacy of Blair's predecessor' (as McKibbin puts it) has developed into a perfect specimen of transformismo - phoney rupture into a successor '-ism' which bears forward elements from both Right and Left. In other words, it is national, a successor state-nation paradigm, not limited to one or other Party inheritance or policy-set. The '-ism' that really counts in the assumed mantle and aureole of the United Kingdom state: British nationalism. ■

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ASLEF calls for the Government to introduce a charter of workers' rights that would include, the right to full employment, rights from day one of employment, the repeal of oppressive anti trade union legislation and positive laws encouraging trade unions to represent their members individually and collectively.

Mick Rix, General Secretary. ASLEF, 9 Arkwright Road, Hampstead, LONDON NW3 6AB.

Conspiracies, cover-ups and making sure s/he is one of us?

There you sit, relaxed by a few pints (Barcardi Breezers for New Labourites) and suddenly it falls into place. "It's a conspiracy!" What better place to find a conspiracy apart from the pub, than on the web. You can find everything from "Who killed Diana?" to "Did the American's actually land on the Moon?" NASA has taken the latter conspiracy so seriously that they have just issued evidence to prove that it did happen!

You don't have to go far to join in the fun. For a huge range of conspiracies from the assassination of JFK to the Coronation of George W Bush, try Conspiracy Theories at www.elementals-astrology.co.uk/conspiracies.htm. In a similar vein, Bob's Conspiracy Theories includes theories on the biggies, including the death of Diana, the moon landings and the JFK assassination. You can find it at www.bghadami.btinternet.co.uk.

George W. Bush and the Triple Crown Dream argues that a shadowy New Right Movement is attempting to gain control of all three branches of government. www.geocities.com/alanjpakula/triplecrown.html.

Better still, have a look at the work of Robin Ramsay, serendipity.magnet.ch/eden/laconspi.html. Here he is talking about the revulsion rather than scepticism shown by academics to conspiracy theories but as with the very function of a conspiracy theory he plants those nagging seeds of doubt in our minds that there might just be a grain of truth in some of them.

In actual fact a study of why people resort to conspiracy theories to explain certain happenings is helpful in that their conclusions usually arise from their frustrations at finding no other logic in the decision-making that preceded these happenings. If a democratic government in a multi-party state consistently supports policies that are manifestly not in the interests of the majority is this a failure of pluralism or is it a conspiracy. The article in this edition on the Speculative Society touches on this dilemma. Are the Specs conspiring or are we seeing the mobilisation of bias to prevent certain issues surfacing on the political plain. Certainly the frequent proclamation of Thatcher that "there is no alternative" reiterated recently by Tony Blair in relation to pensions (ours, not his) is a blatant attempt at keeping issues off the agenda and denying that a plurality of views different from his own can legitimately exist.

This would lead us in the direction of discovering if there is a systematic attempt to mobilise bias. Let's look at the British-American Project for the Successor Generation. The first recorded mention of the need for a 'successor generation' came in 1983 when President Ronald Reagan spoke to a

group, including Rupert Murdoch and Sir James Goldsmith, in the White House. The reason for the 21 March gathering that year was US fear of the rising opposition to the siting of Cruise and Pershing missiles in Western Europe.

The liberal-left was the spies' main target, in part because the right could be expected to do as it was told and in part because the CIA feared lefties would fall for the charms of Stalinists. The Project organises annual meetings of hand picked either gullible or supporting political activists. The network is impressive with George Robertson, Mo Mowlam, Peter Mandelson and Chris Smith project alumni, as is Baroness Symons, the Indonesian military's favourite junior Defence Minister. Journalists who have been elevated to the ranks of the Atlanticist elect include Jeremy Paxman of Newsnight, Charles Moore, the editor of the Telegraph, James Naughtie, the Today programme presenter, and Trevor Phillips, the TV reporter who was briefly a candidate for mayor of London. The project's leading wonks are Jonathan Powell, Blair's chief of staff, and Matthew Taylor head of the Institute for Public Policy Research. The Blair landslide incited an ecstatic headline writer in its newsletter to declare: 'UK election news: Big Swing to BAP.'

In Scotland we have our share. Take this entry from the register of members interests:

ALEXANDER, Douglas (Paisley South) 14-18 November 1998, to United States of America for conference organised by the British American Project. The conference organisers met my travel and hotel costs. (Registered 25 November 1998)

From another source: BAP Newsletter June/July 1997, p. 3 "Wendy Alexander was BAP alumnus in 1995."

Many of these alumni found employment in the taxi rank for budding politicians that is international business consultancy. For instance, one Labour cabinet minister in Scotland was previously employed by Booz Allan & Hamilton selling that company's wares which includes, according to its website, working as an "honest broker" in deal-structuring creating a "win-win" situation where the government and the commercial sector both benefit from the deal. Excellent candidates for privatisation include ... Utilities (i.e., power, potable water, and waste-water treatment) ... Housing Privatisation ...Booz-Allen has an experienced group of financial analysts, market analysts, economists, and housing experts who can support housing privatisation programs from site nomination to award." No conspiracy there then.

For more on BAP try www.lobster-magazine.co.uk. ■



Standing room only

You would have thought the comrades in Lanarkshire would have had enough problems trying to work out if they have ever claimed drink and hotel expenses on the CLP development account. The Motherwell and Wishaw accounting row is just one of the many sideshows going on at the moment. The main one concerns which MPs will lose their seats in the forthcoming review of Parliamentary boundaries. These life and death events do produce some gallows humour. Recently a twenty-fifth wedding anniversary party was thrown by the tee total Carfin hibernian, Frank Roy. His old boss Nellie Liddell arrived at the bash with husband Alasdair only to find there were no more seats in the packed hall. As she looked around in a somewhat bemused fashion, a mischievous First Minister was audibly heard to say "That's Helen's problem. She just can't find a seat". Ouch.

Spinning for Nellie

You may remember some months back that the Diary revealed that SMG Public Affairs guru Rhoda MacDonald had applied to join the people's party. Among her more arduous tasks for SMG was to arrange for television feeds of Celtic's last Champions League campaign to be shown down at Millbank, where of course many of the Timmed Up Scottish MPs could not get STV coverage. Well, well, well. Rhoda is now a Special Advisor to our Nellie Liddell following Nick Comfort's decision to explore the joys of sex. It will be interesting to find out just how long Miss Rhoda will last. With her penchant for flirting and attention seeking behaviour, the Diary feels it won't be too long before Nellie takes the hump and dumps her. Already Rhoda is describing herself as a Scottish Alastair Campbell. So now we know. Miss MacDoanld plays the bagpipes, supports Burnley and is a former writer of soft porn. You read it here first.

It would have to be a lot...

What a peculiar figure Iain Duncan Smith looked last week as he went walkabout in Glasgow's Gallowgate. Just as well nobody knew who he was. Tories and the Calton don't really go. What the assembled hacks who followed him around did discover is that the East End's sense of humour is very much alive and well. After chatting with three local girls, one of them turned to a reporter who was scribbling her very word and said "Dae ah get paid for that then?". The reporter explained that they didn't pay for this kind of thing. Quick as a flash she remarked "If a telt yae ah was hivin his wean, you would pay me for that".

The loner award

It's judging time once again in the Herald's Politician of the Year competition. Apparently the award for Free Spirit of the Year is causing the judges some problems. Among the contenders - Dorothy-Grace Elder for giving two fingers to John Swinney, Margo Macdonald for giving two fingers to John Swinney, Henry McLeish for giving two fingers to Henry McLeish. And finally Mike Watson for simultaneously giving two fingers to Jack McConnell and his constituents campaigning to save the Vicky. The smart money is on the Lord Watson.

Jamie live?

Jamie McGrigor, the posh, very detached but quite likeable spokesman on Fisheries for the Scottish Conservatives isn't noted for having his finger on the pulse. Last week he wandered into the Parliament's black and white corridor waiting to appear on the BBC's Holyrood Live programme. "I'm here for Holyrood Live" he announced. "Sorry, wrong side" came the reply from a confused Bernard Ponsonby. "Oh" exclaimed poor Jamie. Not to be put off he asked STVs political editor "tell me is it a recorded interview they do?". "No Jamie, it's not called Holyrood Live for nothing".