

The voice of Scotland?

What's to be done with our media?



Paul Holleran on a Scottish Media Commission
Gregor Gall on the state of the trade unions

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comment

Like so many other 'debates' at the start of this century, the debate about our media has conveniently ossified. Just like 'free' trade, the divine right of markets to exist, the relativity of human rights, the need for 'just' war or the relentless requirement to 'modernise', discussion begins from a base which is so loaded in one direction that making sense of where we are becomes difficult. Simply by repeating a few apparent axioms enough times they become the only possible starting point and then, because of the narrow alley down which they direct questions, the only possible end point. If we begin by accepting that all apples are red, what happens to green apples?

And so it is with press freedom. When we start talking about what we might do about the abusive power that the media wields over public life, we seem required to do so from a starting point of accepting that the need for the press to be 'free' is unquestionable. This is not to suggest that we should be considering a state controlled media, it is to suggest that we need to think more carefully about what 'free' means. Free to tell lies? Free to ignore anything a proprietor doesn't want to be known? Free to pursue a monopoly strategy? Indeed, do we **really** mean that the 'freedom' of the press should be linked only to the financial ability to buy that freedom?

So if we choose not to start from that point, where might we start? How about if we pose the question 'what do we want from our media?' Despite the dumbing-down process, despite the scepticism many feel towards the media, despite enormous flaws, the media is one half of the absolute conditions necessary for a democracy to exist (education being the other). Democracy is another of the great untested axioms of our age. It is assumed that nothing but democracy can be countenanced, but that all that is needed is a right to vote. It is not. The right to vote is no more sufficient to make someone a citizen than the right to cut someone open is to make them a doctor. Unless someone is capable of understanding what the real impact of their vote is and the extent to which it is achieving the outcomes they want to see for their society, it is not expressing their will. Multiply this by millions and we might be less smug in the west about assuming that our electoral system can reasonably be described as reflecting the will of its people. The worst political system apart from all the rest indeed.

To understand how a 'free' press can entirely negate democracy we need only take a glance to Venezuela. A democratically elected leader who connected with the sentiments of the vast numbers of dispossessed and who

represented the expression of their desire for a change in their society ought to be the epitome of democracy. And yet, because part of his agenda for making his society fairer challenges the financial interests of the powerful, the powerful have flipped this picture upside down. Those who demand a perpetuation of poverty and starvation are those who are currently rich and sated; by no coincidence, also the people who own all of the media. By telling the tale as one of a corrupt leader ignoring the almost unanimous wishes of his people they are not rewriting history, they are rewriting now. If democracy is about the will of the people, Venezuela is an almost perfect example of how a 'free' press is one of the most effective ways to ensure there is no democracy.

We don't face quite the same problem in Britain or in Scotland, but we are certainly in no position to be smug. The **Daily Mail** has made a nation with paedophilia, violent crime and immigration at levels below those of recent decades believe that our society is coming apart at the seams. In pursuit of a reactionary policy of spreading panic, the **Daily Mail** spends every day of the year filling our minds with fear and hatred - take a look at a week's Mail editorials and see if you can find one which is actually positive about something. Make no mistake, this is an attempt to undermine democracy.

We have the same problem in Scotland. Everyone has seen the hostility of large parts of the print media to the Scottish Parliament. The ordinary people of Scotland actually think the Scottish Parliament has spent a lot of time discussing fox hunting. Seven hours over the course of four years, actually. Nobody is in any doubt that the will of the Scottish people is opposed to fox hunting (this is one of those clear moral issues in which we don't need a vast amount of information to come to a decision - the torture of a defenceless animal for the pleasure of a few doesn't require much supporting evidence), but the **Mail**, the **Scotsman** and even the **Daily Record** were not content to let it rest at that. They genuinely believe that their will is more important.

But to return to the question of what we want from our media, we really do have to support the right of people to express different opinions, and if the owners of newspapers want to rip foxes to shreds they have a right to put forward their case. Trying to persuade people of their case is not the big problem. The more insidious problem is the suppression of the information that people need to assess these opinions. Everyone knows a fox feels pain and that is the key piece of information. But should the International Monetary Fund be requiring Argentina to privatise its state assets? Do the Public Sector Borrowing Requirement benefits of PFI outweigh its cost? Which is

more dangerous, a small vial of ricin or a kitchen knife which, after all, is capable of killing a lot more people a lot more quickly? (Of course, "Kitchen Knife Found in Asylum Seeker's House" isn't really going to rally much support for a Blair speech in support of an extremist American regime.)

There is a dual strategy being pursued by the market capitalist ideologues who own our 'free' press. Firstly, make sure that people don't have the information and evidence with which to answer any of the above questions in a way which might challenge the rights of a minority to entrench their privilege, but supply them with edited information and the drip-drip of opinion to ensure the right answer. Secondly, try to get them to opt out of these decisions altogether. Don't be fooled into thinking that the senior managers at Northcliffe (owners of the Mail group) actually want poor people to vote. Led, worryingly, by the **Herald's** new owners Gannett, the '90s saw a process of cutting back on hard news in the American press and its replacement with 'lifestyle' copy on things such as celebrity gossip and recipes. The message is clear - your fate is not actually interesting, so lets have a look at Brad and Jennifer's new baby. The analogy with the control of the Gammas by the Alphas in Huxley's **Brave New World** is direct and complete.

Do we really mean that the 'freedom' of the press should be linked only to the financial ability to buy that freedom?

So we might be able to agree that a 'free' media can be a pretty worrying thing, but then there really isn't any alternative, is there? Not if we start from the assumption that there is no alternative. So let us for a few sentences start from a different assumption. What if all media was free in the sense that there was no editorial control by the State, but that it could not be owned by individuals or that it could not be profit making? What if the number of

media outlets were to be quadrupled and funded by the State but contracted out to a diverse range of trusts which controlled content, all with different political and cultural viewpoints? What if all media had a public interest clause ensuring that distortion of fact was illegal? What if advertising was banned? Impossible, right? So how come the BBC exists?

This is only to say that there are alternatives, and that criticising the 'free' press as a dangerous thing as currently constituted in western democracies does not equate you as a Stalinist. The media has far too much power and it is painting the world in its own image with virtually no challenge. Hardly anyone actually likes this state of affairs, so let the debate begin in earnest. This issue of the Scottish Left Review does not begin from quite such an extreme position, but for one of the first times in public debate in Scotland it suggests a significant number of things that we could actually do to change the situation we find ourselves in. ■

an open letter to our MSPs

It seems increasingly likely that the lives of many innocent Iraqi civilians are to be sacrificed in a war instigated in large part by the Government of the UK. The lives of many young men conscripted into the Iraqi armed forces will also be ended. Relationships between the West and the Middle East will be strained further, terrorism encouraged and peace made more difficult to achieve. Domestically, a war in Iraq would leave the Muslim community in Britain facing even more hostility and mistrust, would take the lives of many of our own armed forces (not least Scottish ones in their traditional role in the vanguard of British imperial enterprise) and would waste valuable resources which would better be used to invest in public services.

Meanwhile the benefits are difficult to identify. No-one with any genuine understanding of the politics of middle east believes that Saddam Hussain's regime has any links with Al Qaeda, nor that it has or is anywhere near developing weapons capable of threatening Europe or America, and its neighbours are very much more worried about war than about Saddam. Certainly the Iraqi regime is a vicious and repressive one with a shocking record on human rights, but the prospects of a stable and sustainable Iraqi regime emerging in the aftermath of a war are not good. Even if they were, loss of life on the scale being considered is not justified by these ends.

Make no mistake, whether the methods of modern warfare have desensitised us to the fact or not, a war in Iraq will be illegal under any reading of international law. The war will not be pursued in self defence and as a last resort once all other means of resolution have been exhausted and the methods of executing the war will make no attempt to differentiate between combatants and non-combatants; innocent children – who make up 42 per cent of the Iraqi population – will be slaughtered indiscriminately.

All of this is taking place with virtually no democratic scrutiny. We are inundated with propaganda from the British and American governments, some of which has already been shown to be untrue. The efforts of the United Nations to find a solution short of war are being undermined. And the views of millions of Scottish people are being ignored. Despite opinion polls which indicate that at least half the population oppose the war being proposed and despite mass demonstrations which have brought tens of thousands of people to the streets of Scotland, the democratic bodies which are elected to represent the views of these people are expressing virtually none of their concern.

The Scottish Left Review is not a campaigning organisation, nor does it have an editorial line or policies. We exist in part to provide a space where those on the left can challenge the views expressed by the right on issues like the war. However, the debate on the war has been controlled and dominated by those intent on military action in Iraq to the extent that there is little space left for that majority of Scots who oppose a war outright or have very serious concerns they want addressed.

That is why we are writing this open letter to all of Scotland's MSPs. The Scottish Parliament is the only democratic body which the people of Scotland can hold accountable, and it is the only body with the legitimacy to speak for the people of Scotland. That is why we have called for the Scottish Parliament to hold a full debate on a war before it begins. We know that many MSPs will be personally worried by events, but equally we know that they will come under very great pressure not to oppose a war in which such powerful interests are vested. That is precisely why it is so important that they reflect the views of the interests that they were elected to represent; the people of Scotland.

If we are thrown into a war without the fears of at least half of the country being forcefully voiced by our elected representatives then our democracy will have failed. Scotland is small country and we do not believe that our small voice alone can stop this war. But we cannot allow a silence which others will call consensus for murder.

The Editorial Board of the Scottish Left Review

a socialist media policy for Scotland?

David Miller introduces a group of experts on the Scottish media who consider what elements might contribute to a socialist media policy in Scotland

What would it mean to see a socialist or even a moderately consistent social democratic policy on the media and communication adopted in Scotland? For a start it would not mean policy in the narrow terms in which it is usually discussed. It means a transformation of the economics, politics and culture of communication in both the media industries (radio, TV, press, books, internet) and in other areas of communication (advertising, PR and lobbying industries, spin doctors, civil service, corporate disclosure).

Policy is perhaps not the word for it. Since it is about bringing about the conditions for people to have much easier access to communicate between each other; democratic accountability in media behaviour; and crucially democratic accountability of government and corporations both in the sense of requiring disclosure and effective reporting and monitoring by the media. A first step is opening up the means of communication. But we should not see the Executive as the guarantor of this. Rather it is about putting laws into place which allow self-organisation and strengthening the union organisation of media workers (as Gregor Gall argues below).

What follows is not an exhaustive list of policy demands. It does, though, contain some key media and communication policy objectives which we hope can help to foster a wider debate on media policy in Scotland. To date, the debate has tended to be limited to questions of ownership and control, specifically that these should reside in 'Scottish' hands. This has not been conceived in narrow nationalist terms and the term 'Scottish' has usually been meant inclusively as indicating that ownership and editorial control are best exercised either in Scotland or in a manner which is sympathetic to local (Scottish) concerns. This has been the case over the debate on the Scottish Six and the sale of the Herald by SMG. The ongoing debate over the Communications Bill does point up the necessity for a specifically Scottish media policy (as Robert Beveridge shows below).

While many of these concerns are fully justified, the media policy debate needs to be broader in two key respects. First, Scottish control will not of itself deliver diverse media which hold those in power to account. Second, ownership and control, while crucial, are not the only problematic issues in the Scottish media.

Scottish control can be delivered, particularly in relation to editorial control and the regulatory apparatus for

media complaints (as Roz Patterson discusses below), and both would undoubtedly be a significant advance. The latter mainly because the commission proposed would be a statutory body not a self regulatory body which systematically favours industry interests. The former would allow a broader range of voices access to broadcasting in Scotland. It is also clear that it would be popular with journalists across the BBC and SMG. SMG is said by insiders to be very close to folding to (internal and external) pressure to provide a Scottish Six. It is clear that this should be an immediate policy objective.

But even if (or when) it is won, problems of Scottish generated coverage will remain. The most obvious reason why Scottish-controlled media would not be a panacea is current Scottish output. While there is some good Scottish journalism and a fair number of dedicated and professional hacks, it is not only a lack of resources and editorial control in Glasgow which frustrates diverse coverage. While there have been some innovations in Scottish broadcasting in recent years - one thinks especially of **Scottish Women** - the lack of the voices of ordinary Scots on the broadcast media is striking. As Easterhouse community worker Bob Holman has repeatedly argued, the BBC gives little time to critics of the system and to those who challenge capitalism. "The BBC fails to see that, by daily airing of the state of the financial markets, it is reinforcing a political and economic system to which some citizens object". Holman goes on to argue for a number of reforms "for starters": first, the need to widen the range of backgrounds of political commentators. Second, reform **Question Time** and similar shows to include the poor, those who "understand questions on low incomes, insecure employment and poor housing from experience". Third, broadcasters should cover community politics not just party politics. And fourth, give a voice to the homeless and to others left behind by the consumer society (Bob Holman 'Tune in, Turn Off, **The Big Issue**, 11-17 February 2002). Accessing such voices is not difficult - as Lesley Riddoch shows every weekday - but it does require a re-orientation of broadcasting priorities.

The effect of the narrow class background of many Scottish broadcasters on news values is striking. Why is it 'good news' if house prices rise again in central Scotland? Broadcasters seem unable to cover house price rises in any other way. The downsides of high house prices for the majority of the Scottish population (public sector workers priced out of the market, new housing developments in the commuter belt leading to congestion and more pollution

as the Forth Bridge groans under the weight of four wheel drives and BMWs). If news is to be 'balanced' the pressing need is for journalists to get out a bit more and to explain the ways in which 'good news' for some may be bad news for the rest of us. Devolved broadcasting has already shown that the 'metrovincial' London perspective need not set agendas, but a Scottish Six would need to go further in improving coverage of both internal and international affairs. At present, although there is some good coverage, much international news is stuck between a dependence on London and a narrow 'Scottish' perspective. Opening this up to diverse international perspective (even through the selective use of suppliers like Euronews) would help (as Henry McCubbin notes below). At present the narrowness of coverage of the European Union is striking, with an all but unintelligible agenda on the problems of the Euro or an obsession with simplistic, yet safe, euro-sceptic vs euro-ophile perspectives. This kind of reporting leaves most people none the wiser about the importance of Europe. But an alternative model does exist, which provides the most open and thoughtful coverage of Europe in the UK. This is the BBC's Gaelic current affairs offering **Eorpa**, which can follow its own agenda precisely because it is in the margins.

Diversity also requires that journalists are drawn from a wider pool than at present. One route is (as Gregor Gall argues below) to build the strength of the media unions. Furthermore, the needs of communities outside the central belt or outside the mainstream also need providing for (as Chris Atton argues below). The technically easy step of opening up bandwidth for radio (and even television) is inhibited simply by politics and vested interests. Local radio stations should be facilitated to provide for local communities or other groups. The **Radio Ramadan** experience in Glasgow shows the potential for community self organisation. Similarly with Gaelic the need to support living cultures is clear, but the danger is that professionalised journalists in Queen Margaret Drive lose contact with the communities they are supposed to serve as has happened to some extent in the Irish Republic.

The dependence of the media on advertising is in itself a significant reason why we get the trivia-obsessed media we do, but advertising is a problem itself, because it encourages a consumer society which is both environmentally unsustainable and exacerbates poverty and inequality in Scotland and internationally. Perhaps most importantly, advertising directly harms Scots through the promotion of tobacco, alcohol and fast foods, directly contributing to more deaths than any other causes. In the US McDonalds is facing a class action by young people who are claiming that deceptive advertising helped to make them obese. We could see similar

Minor tweaking or defence of the status quo are not the only game in town

actions here, but at present the industry is overseen by the Advertising Standards Authority, a toothless self-regulatory body with no evident desire even to insist that adverts are truthful. Hence advertising should be covered by the proposed Scottish media commission and should be strictly required to prove the accuracy of claims. More importantly however, there is an urgent need to prohibit the most harmful kinds of advertising. Tobacco

is an obvious case on which the debate has been won, but the policy process is struggling to keep up. In the US the most recent campaign initiative is to shame the film industry into refusing kickbacks from the tobacco industry. Other candidates include fast food promotion in general and in schools in particular. Across Scotland corporate promotion of fast foods and fizzy drinks has been infiltrating schools, mostly

through school meals. The newly appointed food Tsar should take a strong position on this, following the lead of the WHO, and all Scottish councils should act against corporate promotion and low quality/unhealthy food in schools. Advertising should also be banned from all children's programming as it is in some other European countries. If social inclusion is a genuine aim of policy makers the exclusion created by encouraging kids to want expensive things that they don't need and consume products which can kill them, should be a high priority.

Accountability in the media will not be delivered only by increasing the freedom of journalists to work unencumbered by corporate priorities. There is also a serious need to open up a still secretive policy process. There has been a debate on the regulation of lobbyists and undue corporate influenced on the Parliament, but if we really want to avoid that - or the abuse by the executive of press freedom - there is a need for more systematic disclosure by both corporations and the civil service. The Freedom of Information legislation does not go nearly far enough and will allow civil servants and ministers to retain information which should be disclosed. A wholesale reform of civil service culture is required. The Fol provisions also need to be radically reformed to abolish (or at least radically strengthen) the provisions on commercial confidentiality. This will be the provision which will be used to deny citizens and Parliament crucial information about the wave of PFI and PPP projects currently underway. Crucially, they will not challenge the endemic secrecy surrounding the negotiations on GATS, which will begin to seriously undermine our public services - allowing multinationals to run education, health and other services - in 2003. Furthermore corporate disclosure laws - in the wake of Enron - need seriously tightened, though they have been quietly dropped by Bush and are not deemed necessary in London. Debates on this and on GATS and advertising regulation are currently taking place at the EU level, a further indication of the

limitations of a purely Scottish-based debate. In London and in Brussels such debates are dominated by the narrow interests of the corporations. We must raise them more effectively in Scotland.

We are not suggesting that the changes we are advocating are going to happen tomorrow or without a great deal of struggle, but it is as well to be clear that minor tweaking or defence of the status quo are not the only game in town, even while we concentrate on the fine grain of contemporary struggles.

A Scottish Media Commission

Roz Patterson

The recent controversy over the SMG's sale of the Herald, Sunday Herald and Evening Times, a sale that could have resulted in the nation's two national broadsheets being edited-in-chief by the same person, highlights the fact that Scotland needs to get a grip of its own media. Because media ownership is not a devolved issue, MSPs and lobbyists were put in the peculiar position of having to campaign from afar for something that would hit them very close to home. Ultimately SMG decided in favour of another bidder but, even in a far from ideal world, we should have something stronger than a wing and a prayer to safeguard us.

The Scottish NUJ executive unanimously passed a motion, proposed by the Scottish Socialist Party's Hugh Kerr, calling for the establishment of a Scottish Media Commission. This should be set up by the Scottish Parliament, as opposed to the Executive, and be likewise accountable to the Scottish Parliament. Though the Parliament will doubtless be dominated by the party of the Executive, it should serve to prevent the crushing of any anti-Executive reporting.

The Scottish Media Commission will exist to ensure the freedom of the press, notably from concentration of ownership, and the rights of the citizen.

Currently we're reliant on the Press Complaints Commission, the self-regulatory body which singularly failed to address issues such as the **Daily Record's** inaccurate and misleading vilification of Tommy Sheridan MSP, or to uphold the rights of citizens who have either been unfortunate enough to be picked out for media intrusion or who seek to avail themselves of unbiased news.

Though the Communications Bill, the biggest piece of media legislation to hit the fan since the birth of ITV, offers what appears on first sight to be a less toothless regulatory body - OFCOM - it still fails to address these concerns. First off, it is still a 'self-regulatory' body, chaired by a Labour peer and charged with representing not only the public but also business interests.

Secondly, it doesn't stipulate the need for a Scottish representative on its board which, if you were one of the journalists living under a dark, Andrew Neil-shaped cloud last November, is a serious omission. The Scottish Media Commission motion comes before the STUC this April. (Paul Holleran, Scottish Organiser of the NUJ, considers the need for a Scottish Media Commission elsewhere in this issue of the SLR).

The manufactured consensus

As is so often the case, we seem to waste time arguing about the wrong things in Scotland. I have heard people debating whether the media in Scotland is all pro-Labour. "But what about the hard time they gave Jack McConnell?" someone will say. Who cares? It is not that all of our newspapers support Labour unflinchingly, it is that they will never allow any serious consideration of the alternatives to the consensus to which Labour has signed up. The **Daily Record** on the day before this SLR goes to press reveals that PFI-built Wishaw General hospital is absolutely full and can't take any more patients, something that never occurred in the old Law Hospital it replaced. This, of course, is because the private profit which PFI needs to extract has resulted in a loss of over a hundred hospital beds in Lanarkshire. The **Record** is mildly shocked, but goes to lengths in its editorial to stress that PFI is the only way to get new money into public services. This is the paper that is supposed to be the voice of the Labour movement in Scotland.

Occasional mild scepticism among the glorified reporting of our military might about a war every other thinking person is horrified about, outright rejection of any debate about independence or even greater autonomy for Scotland, vilification of the firefighters, the shocking treatment of Tommy Sheridan and Alex Salmond in 1999 (both elected politicians, let us recall). We don't have to worry about whether the media is Labour supporting, certainly not for as long as it opposes absolutely everything else. Be reminded one more time, violent crime, murder, paedophilia and immigration are all at levels well below the peaks of the last forty years. Yet almost every citizen of Britain thinks the opposite. The political debate in this country is not being influenced in terms of who the papers tell you to vote for, but in terms of the world they are making you believe you live in. All dissent has been written out of the right wing, moral panic, market capitalist vision of our world.

Or almost. There are some exceptions, and people are beginning to notice. To take two examples: the **Sunday Herald** allows an admirable space for environmental reporting and alternative commentators, questions the orthodoxy on war or the functioning of the markets and is balanced in its reporting: and, the great surprise in the past year, the **Mirror** has been a revelation in its coverage of international affairs and issues like the fire

strike, giving a popular voice to viewpoints which had been previously confined to dissident academics. It is your duty to ensure that consumer power recognises this. Drop your subscription to the **Daily Record** and take the **Mirror**, at least until the Record learns some kind of lesson (indeed, take a **Mirror** anyway just to encourage it to keep up the good work). Make sure that the **Sunday Herald's** new owners have no excuse to drop it. Buy two copies if necessary. The consumer can be powerful here.

Scotland has a strength over England in its regional dailies. England is held ransom by the metropolitan media; at least in Scotland there is more diversity. This needs to be supported, and we need to get a wider range of views into local papers - they are influential. We need to review media ownership (and Scotland must be considered an entity in this regard) and we need to get much more diversity in who is deciding the content of what we read. The alternative media movement needs to be supported, and public funding should be available for this - it is clearly in the public interest. And public procurement policy should be used to support that diversity - libraries, local authorities and all other public sector purchasers should be explicitly required to support diversity of media outlets in its purchasing.

We don't all agree with George Bush. Newspapers really can't be allowed to be the last to recognise this.

Reporting the world to Scotland

Henry McCubbin

It is self evident that television, being a visual medium, packs its greatest punch when the pictures provide a dramatic impact beyond speech or the written word. The proliferation of high quality domestic digital video cameras and lightweight professional equipment has provided news editors with a breadth of material hitherto undreamt of. The events in New York at the end of 2001 give a truly amazing illustration of this phenomenon.

The aim of television and radio news has always been to bring you the events as they are happening: to put you the viewer in the position of witness to history. You see history as it happens, unedited, therefore you can draw your own conclusions. Or can you? I worked in television for almost thirty years and at one point I was struck by a strange phenomenon. The mass audience appeared to be capable of uncritically watching a programme that espoused opinions, which were manifestly against their interests, yet they accepted them as a worldview and not the opinion of the representatives of a narrow class interest.

It was about this time that I was thumbing through a copy of the Policy Guidance Notes for talks and current affairs in the BBC and came across an entry under the letter 'F'. It read "Fascism: see under communism." So, accepting the odd invitation I discovered the following

entry; "Communism and fascism: Care should be taken in mounting programmes on these subjects, and reference upwards should always be made in the case of major programme enterprises." I have no doubt that **Radio Moscow** had a similar instruction to staff regarding capitalism, but of course that was exactly why we had to abhor their system wasn't it?

The news we view, particularly that from abroad, is as much a social construct as the best novel. When a newsworthy event happens (leaving aside the cultural system and its individual products who define what is or is not newsworthy) its chances of being placed on the agenda reside in the possibilities of getting visuals to cover it. This in turn depends on the resources immediately controlled by the editor and on the possibility of buying in the material from other agencies. The problem is magnified when the events happen abroad.

Much of foreign coverage from the BBC now depends on where certain American networks have assigned their crews. Our major news programmes still relate to European affairs under the rubric of foreign affairs. Oddly, and to its credit, the only programme which ventures into the rest of Europe, is **Eorpa**, a Gaelic programme that consistently provides us with topics which impact directly on the Scottish body politic yet are ignored elsewhere.

Under John Birt the pursuit of **BBC24** was a financial and editorial disaster. It is shaped to appeal to business audiences, a service already provided by Sky and CNN but in the BBC's case paid not by the market system but by licence fees which fall heaviest on the poorest in our society. The opportunity was available in the early 1990s for the BBC to join with a consortium in Europe called **Euronews**. This would have turned the BBC's worldview from its present Atlanticist orientation. Instead of Scotland sending reporters to cover the American presidential elections, we might concentrate more on the political activities in these countries which make up the European Union and have a more direct effect on our daily lives.

Eorpa has shown that BBC Scotland can slip away from Foreign Office scrutiny and provide more than a parochial news output. A Scottish Six worthy of the name must be able to do the same and bring a refreshing perspective, a view from a country that is part of Europe and capable of informing its audience of the complexities of the national systems and cultures to which we are politically united.

Strong unions = free media

Gregor Gall

Well-regarded and high profile journalists such as Paul Foot, Laurie Flynn, John Pilger and Seumas Milne have often argued that strong trade unions in the media are essential to ensuring that the media fulfils its job as a

scrutineer of the rich and powerful as well as carrying out the 'sword of justice' role. This has been argued to be more effectual than mere state regulation of the media. Simply put, without a strong and vibrant union, media workers are unwilling and unable to challenge their employers' editorial diktat for fear of dismissal and victimisation (on pay, promotion and tasks) because they have no countervailing resource to neutralise management threats and action. This argument took on an added significance during and after the employers' offensive against the National Union of Journalists in the newspaper industry following Murdoch's victory against the print unions at Wapping in 1986. By the mid-1990s, the vast majority of NUJ chapters throughout Britain had been derecognised by their respective employers. Employers sought to prevent the NUJ becoming the 'new NGA' after direct input with a view to controlling labour costs and protecting their editorial freedom. Consequently, wage levels fell overall, job insecurity increased and employers reigned supreme over both wages/conditions and editorial content.

Since 1998, aided by the influence of the prospect, and then presence, of the statutory union recognition provisions of the Employment Relations Act 1999, the NUJ has won back recognition at the vast majority of newspaper employers including the **Scotsman/Evening News/Scotland on Sunday** and **Daily Record/Sunday Mail**. Concomitant, there has been the re-awakening of collective confidence, epitomised by a series of strikes over pay and confidence. This is necessary but, on its own, insufficient to rebuild union organisation and journalists' confidence. The case of the NUJ repelling political interference at the **Wishaw Press** in late 2001 is an exception. Journalists need to collectively contest the managerial prerogative not merely in trade union, but also in professional, terms. Success in doing so is needed to build further confidence. At the same time, the necessary heightened levels of consciousness may develop to ensure that journalists implement their own fine and long-standing, but often ignored, Code of Conduct. Only then can there be a hope that the newspaper employers' predominately right-wing agenda and pressures towards bias, safety and mediocrity vis-à-vis vested interests (politicians, businesses, advertisers) accentuated by the 'goldfish bowl', can be challenged and ameliorated. Only then, may we see the return of investigative journalism and the representation of the social democratic tradition in Scotland in the Scottish press.

Controlling our tastes

People buy **Celine Dion** and watch Hollywood blockbusters because that's what they like? Well, actually, probably not.

We don't have to worry about whether the media is Labour supporting, certainly not for as long as it opposes absolutely everything else

The media, in the very definition of the word, is the space through which the majority of people are linked with what is happening in all but their immediate surroundings. Generally this is taken to mean the extent to which we learn about what is happening in world affairs, but it applies equally to our knowledge of culture and the arts. Much of the music we listen to we first hear through commercial broadcasters, as film or advert tie-ins or, increasingly, via television advertising. The result of this is that most people only ever become aware of a tiny fraction of the music which is being produced each year. For every **Buena Vista Social Club** crossover, there are thousands of good and approachable new albums of similar music being produced around the world. A little-known band like **The Evinrudes** actually sounds a lot like a **Sheryl Crow** with edgier lyrics. We rely on newspaper reviews and adverts to

let us know about what is on at the cinema. Tabloids are always exceptionally generous about blockbusters, in part because they think this is what their target audience is interested in. There are occasional crossover successes - something like **The Usual Suspects** was not initially conceived as a mass-market film. But for every **Usual Suspects** many more inventive and exciting films like **Memento** are consigned to a lonely art house existence.

The media has an enormous control over the public's knowledge of the culture around them, and it is greatly distorting the public imagination. Part of the problem is the power of Big Business to influence the editorial decisions of the print and broadcast media, part of the problem is the underestimation of the intelligence of readers, and part of the problem is a desire of many 'market capitalists' to suppress critical or subversive popular culture (rap music bad because it "encourages violence in black people", Hollywood war movies good because it encourages the acceptance of state violence by white people). The narrow, myopic treatment of arts and culture - particularly popular culture - in the media is harming the intellectual development of our society and supporting and maintaining inequality in the weight different voices carry.

Those working at the coalface of the media can do much. They can't control the advertising around their copy, but they can kick back against the mindless trivialisation of our world perpetrated by Heat and Hello magazines (and how painful it is to see a generation glued to these awful mind-control drugs). People who control editorial content need to have more faith in the critical faculties of their readers and journalists and reviewers need to stop writing the interviews, review and previews that they **think** their 'idealised consumer' readers want.

But more must be done. A proper arts policy has to find a way to create space and momentum behind those albums, films, books and so on which don't have the weight of Sony or Universal Pictures behind them. The government has a role to balance the power of capital so that people are picking the music and films they actually like from hundreds of options, not selecting the one that seems the best choice of the only five they have been told about.

The Communications Act 2003: In whose Interest?

Robert Beveridge

For 50 years or so, British society maintained a balanced arrangement with commercial broadcasters. Companies such as STV were required to produce and distribute content which may have been niche or less than fully commercial. In other words to accept that broadcasting in the public service required assent to, and acceptance of, values which were broader than the purely commercial and market driven.

However, as ever, the arrival of new communications technology disturbs the existing balance of political, economic, social and cultural power. Convergence between computers, television and telephony combines with New Labour's rhetoric about modernisation, globalisation and dynamic competitiveness to produce a new Act which will attempt to be future proof and serve the interests of New Labour's friends in corporate capitalism.

Earlier drafts of the Bill (which is co-sponsored by Department of Culture, Media and Sport - DCMS - and Department of Trade and Industry - DTI) contained clauses which signalled or prioritised the interests of the citizen. This impetus emanated from the DCMS in the days of Chris Smith as Secretary of State: Tessa Jowell, on the other hand, has conceded the primacy of the term consumer and allowed the term citizen to all but completely disappear. This weakening of public service can be traced in the terms of reference being developed for the new super regulator OFCOM which will combine the duties and functions of a number of existing regulators such as the Independent Television Commission, the Radio Authority, the Broadcasting Standards Commission and The Office for Telecommunications.

However, looking after the consumer is very different to taking account of the interests of the citizen. Moreover, the new regulator has a main board of nine members, none of whom are charged with the responsibility to represent the interests of a specific nation within the United Kingdom. Traditionally there was one ITC Commissioner or BSC or RA Board member to speak for the interests of each of Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales. Whatever the limitations of those who were chosen for these roles, the fact that there was a place on the agenda (and as of right) for such interests was an important recognition of the

diversity of the embryonic federal state that is the UK.

Media policy remains largely a reserved power to Westminster - alongside defence and foreign policy - and this flies in the face of devolution. So both the interests of Scotland and of public service broadcasting are at risk in this new act and in the policies and codes of practice which will be developed by OfCom over the next few years.

What can socialists do about this, how and when? The Act is scheduled to receive Royal Assent in the summer and OfCom is to be up and running in October 2003. If there is time, lobby your MP and members of the House of Lords. If not, maintain a close watch on the activities of OfCom and intervene and lobby whenever appropriate. Press for a Scottish Committee for OfCom and lobby for that to have full and diverse representation.

Finally, prepare for the battles over the BBC's charter renewal in 2006. The BBC is the best we have; it may have many faults but if you judge someone by their enemies then the mere fact that Murdoch has, for many years, been trying to destabilise the BBC and PSB means that now is the time for us to defend public service values in broadcasting.

Alternative media: a case for development

Chris Atton

What place do alternative media have in Scotland? The need for alternative media has emerged as an urgent one in these times of media consolidation and neoliberalism. 'Alternative media' is a resolutely relative term, one which can include the media of pressure groups and advocacy groups; the grassroots campaigning journalism of new social movements; ethnic and gender minority group media; the 'working class press' of Marxist-Leninism; anarchist publications. Neither should it ignore the increasing use of video, audio and Internet practices for such interventions. This diversity makes consistent, historic and long-term challenges difficult, particularly in a small country like Scotland, where political fragmentation and geographic isolation can be acute.

In Scotland there is a significant anarchist contribution to alternative media. Though **Scottish Anarchist** was shortlived, **Counter Information** (www.j12.org/lothian/ci/) has been produced regularly since 1984. It contains accounts of working-class resistance and struggles against global capitalism. The Edinburgh-based **AK Press and Distribution** has for many years acted as both publisher and clearing-house for thousands of books, periodicals and pamphlets, ranging from the academic work of Bookchin and Chomsky to communiques from grassroots groups and individuals. The **West Highland Free Press** has at its heart the radical politics of the regions beyond the central belt. Founded in 1972 it is the longest-running alternative newspaper in Scotland.

It continues to campaign for land reform, advocates the increased use of Gaelic (there are Gaelic and English articles in each issue) and is unique in Scotland as a large-scale, radical community newspaper. Also worth mentioning are the SSP's weekly paper, **The Voice** and the arts oriented, **Variant**, (www.variant.org.uk) which valuably provides critical and radical perspectives on culture and politics available nowhere else.

More visible across the nation is **The Big Issue in Scotland**, whose aim - as is well-known - is to 'help the homeless help themselves', by selling copies of the paper on the street (they make 60 pence on each copy). In Scotland there are around 1,000 vendors. **The Big Issue** sells enough to compete with many news-stand magazines and far more than other, more localised or specialist alternative publications. Its circulation is high, around 50 000, well beyond that of **Counter Information's** 12,000 or the **Free Press's** 10,000.

What is missing from the Scottish alternative mediascape? In the US organisations such as **Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting** (www.fair.org) and **ZNet** (www.zmag.org) have presented wide-ranging critiques of the mass media, whilst the **Indymedia** network (www.indymedia.org) have established radical ways of doing journalism. They ask questions about what it means to be a journalist, who is able to participate in news production and the role of the 'amateur' reporter.

The need for such initiatives in Scotland is compelling, yet to date there is little activity here. Anarchist

publications such as **Counter Information** offer only limited space for such interventions; the **MediaLens** website (www.medialens.org and based in England) focuses largely on the English media. The **Indymedia** network is beginning to be established in the UK; there is much potential here. The need for a Scottish-focused organisation, for example, dedicated to the rigorous interrogation of corporate activity (including media organisations), their public accountability and their relation to the public interest is surely acute. A similar organisation already exists in England, though despite its UK remit the Oxford-based **Corporate Watch** (www.corporatewatch.org.uk) has had little to say specifically about Scotland. Such an organisation might well bring together the existing fragments and fractions of the alternative media and its activists in productive engagement, as would the collaboration of what is left of the radical intelligentsia in Scotland. A radical intellectual community working with activist-journalists might hold out the best hopes for challenge and resistance from the left. ■

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A Manifesto for the Media: some actions to be taken

- A Scottish Media Commission should be established by the Scottish Parliament to support press diversity and citizen's rights.
- Consumers should use what purchasing power we have to support those publications that give space to a wider range of opinions. Public procurement policy in libraries, reception areas etc. should be used to support that diversity.
- Broadcasters in Scotland should broaden the sources from which they take their international material to give a more varied perspective on world affairs.
- Media trade unions should be supported and strengthened to increase the confidence of journalists to work to their own Code of Conduct.
- Arts policy and funding should be used to balance the power of the big entertainment businesses to control which films, music and books etc. get space in the media.
- Scotland should campaign for a Scottish committee of the new OFCOM.
- Alternative media in Scotland should be supported and links with activist journalists should be encouraged.
- A working arrangement (concordat) for shared accountability between Holyrood and Westminster for media issues should be established.

lots of noise, but how many voices?

David Hutcheson explores who owns Scotland's media and asks whether variety and pluralism are the same thing

The libertarian theory of the press, which is still regarded as the basis for the operation of the media in democracies, developed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and during the period of that evolution it became axiomatic that newspapers should be in private hands, otherwise governments would seek to produce propaganda sheets devoid of accurate information. Furthermore, it was believed that the more newspapers there were the better, for thus would be created a market place of ideas in which contending viewpoints would vie with each other, and the discerning reader would be able to distinguish truth from falsehood.

This was always something of an idealised public realm. Only a handful of citizens would ever have had the time to sit in coffee shops adjudicating among different versions of reality, and rather fewer than had the vote, even in an age of restricted franchises. So in more recent times there has been much more emphasis on the professional responsibility of journalists to offer fair and balanced accounts of the events being discussed. It is obvious that as far as the British press is concerned this responsibility is more effectively discharged by broadsheet than by tabloid journalists. An examination of the front pages of say the **Daily Record** and the **Daily Mail** during a general election reveals all too clearly the political orientation of both titles, without a single word of an editorial being read.

Those who saw private ownership of the press as a buttress of freedom could not have been expected to anticipate the growth of the process of concentration which was well under way in the early part of the twentieth century. Nor perhaps could they have foreseen that the combination of concentration and the desire by particular proprietors to use their papers and other media outlets as tools of propaganda, so far from serving society, would pose a threat to the democratic process. The most flagrant contemporary example of that phenomenon is the attempt by the Italian Prime Minister, Silvio Berlusconi, who already owns several television channels, which are generally sympathetic in their treatment of his activities, to pressurize the state broadcaster, **RAI**, in a similar direction. But British proprietors such as Northcliffe and Beaverbrook, though never reaching Berlusconi's dizzy heights in public office, also sought to use their newspapers to advance their own political beliefs.

Not surprisingly therefore governments throughout the world have endeavoured to impose limits on the

concentration of newspaper ownership, and with the advent of radio and television, on cross media ownership also. Few have been able to do more than slow down a process that has seemed at times inexorable, and even fewer to reverse it. The current British government is no exception; indeed, despite the fact that some newspaper acquisitions in the local/regional field have been halted by this administration, the new communications regime which it is bringing into being will make concentration in some areas easier - most obviously in commercial radio and in ITV, which could well become one national company - rather than more difficult.

In many ways Scotland is super-served by the media. In addition to five BBC UK radio channels, and several advertising-financed ones, it has **Radio Scotland** and its companion Gaelic service, a plethora of commercial local stations, five national television channels (though not in all areas) with regional opt outs on several of these, not to mention the additional services now available via cable, satellite or indeed via digital signals on the airwaves. The choice in the newspaper market is just as great - all of the English based dailies and Sundays, often in the form of Scottish editions, plus two daily pan-Scottish broadsheets and two on Sunday, one daily tabloid and two Sunday tabloids, not to mention the regional dailies in Aberdeen and Dundee, plus several evenings and a host of weeklies.

However, the apparent variety masks the limited pluralism of ownership both at UK and Scottish levels. The **Herald** and **Sunday Herald** until recently were owned by the **Scottish Media Group** which for the last few years has also owned **STV** and **Grampian**, giving it in effect 50 per cent of the indigenous broadsheet market and 90 per cent of the Channel Three television audience. Two of the tabloids are owned by one company, **Trinity** - originally an English local paper group - through **Mirror Group Newspapers**, of which the **Daily Record** and the **Sunday Mail** are part. **Trinity** own over twenty local papers in Scotland, but the major Scottish player in this area is the **Johnston Press**, a group whose largely Scottish holdings used to be centred on the **Falkirk Herald**, but which has now over one hundred titles, most of them south of the border, making it one of the UK's largest companies in the regional sector. The other major Scottish based company is **D.C.Thomson** of Dundee, which continues to sell its comics, magazines and newspapers both in its home territory and throughout Britain. The **Barclay Brothers'**

publishing company, which owns the **Scotsman** titles, is a branch of their umbrella holding company, which covers a range of business activities.

The situation **SMG** was in prior to its disposal of its newspapers and magazine holdings at the end of 2002 raised a number of issues. On the one hand it was clear that before it ran into financial difficulties, because of its levels of borrowing, **SMG** had been a reasonably benevolent owner of the **Herald** titles, indeed had it not been prepared to provide the necessary investment, the **Sunday Herald** would not have appeared. On the other hand the company has been criticised for its approach to regional programming in the **Grampian** area. Nor has it always been easy for the arguments about the disposal of these titles to be discussed as thoroughly as they might have been on **STV**, although the editors of the **Herald** and **Sunday Herald** were apparently given significant leeway to comment. The fact that **SMG** has had a good record and has discharged its responsibilities to civic life reasonably well is not however an argument for concentration.

Debate in the latter part of 2002 in the run up to the disposal decision inevitably focused on the possibility of the **Barclay Brothers** acquiring all four pan-Scottish broadsheets. Because under the relevant legislation Scotland is not automatically treated as a separate entity but as part of the UK, such a development would not have been regarded as particularly significant in British terms. That is the problem. It is the Scottish broadsheets that are most focused on Scottish politics, Scottish society and the arts in the country. The attention given to these matters in the London based broadsheets with Scottish editions is significant but is not on the same scale. It is therefore desirable that all of the indigenous broadsheets continue to exist and that politically they do not sing from the same hymn sheet. Much comment has been generated of late by the neo-Thatcherite editorial tone of the Edinburgh titles. It is not at all clear that the **Scotsman's** core readership is particularly enamoured of the way in which the paper has changed under the Barclays and their editor in chief, Andrew Neil; the circulation figures do not suggest that droves of new customers are being attracted. What is perfectly acceptable - and indeed desirable - is that the Edinburgh based titles and the Glasgow based ones should offer alternative perspectives. It therefore follows that no one company should own all of these titles, and that outcome at least looks like being secured.

Where is Holyrood in all of this? MSPs have had things to say, as have Westminster MPs, with the emphasis being on the need for pluralism of ownership to be maintained. So the general climate of opinion which has been generated made it well nigh impossible for **SMG** to sell to the Barclays. Whether the purchase of the titles by **Gannett** is a good thing remains to be seen. This American company owns three hundred regional and local papers in England; it is the biggest chain newspaper organisation in the US, and also produces **USA Today**. **Gannett** is more renowned for its attention to profitability than to journalism, although it is super sensitive to criticism on that score. But it is perfectly clear to any casual observer that if one had to choose between **USA Today** and, for example, the **New York Times**, it is no contest.

Gannett, the new owner of The Herald, is more renowned for its attention to profitability than to journalism

Devolution was a constitutional compromise and one that will surely evolve. Broadcasting remains un-devolved for technical as well as political reasons, as does regulation of media ownership. However, following on from the previous division of powers between the Scottish Office and Westminster, cultural organisations such as Scottish Screen and the Scottish Arts Council are ultimately responsible to the Scottish Parliament. It is hard to see how this situation can continue as it is. Most obviously, broadcasting not only offers versions on the small screen

of Scottish life, it also helps to finance representations aimed initially at the cinema screen, the most recent example being Ken Loach's **Sweet Sixteen**, which is a BBC co-produced film. If the Scottish Parliament were to take a more serious interest in the arts and culture than it has done to date, it would be compelled to look for a way of dealing with the current anomalous lines of accountability. The obvious path forward is to find a working arrangement which ensures that as far as the operations of the broadcasters in Scotland are concerned then there is shared accountability between Holyrood and Westminster. A similar solution should be developed on the ownership front. With goodwill - and political restraint - that should not prove an impossible task. The coming into being shortly of the government's new super-regulator, Ofcom, seems an excellent opportunity for these matters to be effectively addressed. ■

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holding the unaccountable to account

Paul Holleran argues that a Press Complaints Commission for Scotland would be an enormous step in restoring the quality of our media and of debate in Scotland

I am glad I never deviated from the habit of a lifetime, relieved to have left this article until the last minute, written within hours of a deadline set six weeks ago. Why? Because shortly before I commenced this script, two pieces of news reached me, both of which are important to this piece and extremely relevant to the campaign for a Press Commission for Scotland.

At an early morning meeting I heard that negotiations to keep **Business AM** afloat, even in truncated form, had failed. The day before, I met the NUJ **Bam** chapel for the last time before closure of this young and energetic title. A closure which will sadly lead to a loss of journalistic and other publishing jobs but also the removal of a voice of a section of the community and hence a part of the democratic structures of this country.

This was a sophisticated, professional tabloid which gave intelligent analysis and provided information on our economy and businesses and challenged political decision making. It raised informed opinion and debate on essential issues such as pensions and investment in our industries, but is no longer there. Should it have closed? Could it have been saved? Will certain politicians be happy?

The second piece of news was the final takeover of SMG's print interests, particularly the **Herald** and **Sunday Herald**. These are now owned by 'not very friendly to unions' American publisher Gannett - by name and by nature. Some are simply relieved that these titles haven't fallen into the hands of Andrew Neil, viewed by many as the Anti-Christ. Whatever the outcome it once again made it clear that this important decision was decided by the financiers and accountants without any danger of influence by the people of Scotland. The hundreds of thousands of readers, including academics, teachers and students, politicians and constituents and the journalists involved; none of them had any say in where the **Herald**, **Sunday Herald**, **Evening Times** and **Caledonian Magazines** end up

Both these stories could have been different if there was a Press Commission with sufficient clout covering issues such as media ownership.

Do people care about standards of the press and media? Do they understand the role of editors and heads of news in formulating opinion? Is there sufficient concern at the dumbing-down of news and that increasingly news items aim to shock, titillate or entertain rather than inform? If

citizens are poorly informed on issues, if problems facing the governments of the world are trivialised or treated in a bigoted manner then our democracy is threatened. Issues such as the economy, environment, threat of war, crime, asylum seekers have all been handled and reported in some atrocious ways recently by a variety of newspapers. Regularly minority groups complain about the use of inappropriate language in relation to race, creed or disability.

The **Daily Mail** was accused of racism in its reporting of the latest asylum applications. The **Daily Record** faces possible legal threat from Tommy Sheridan MSP for defamation after they vilified him over his policy on drugs management. Newspapers are losing circulation and public trust like snow off a dyke. Even the normally reliable local press is being undermined as companies like Trinity and Clyde & Forth cut jobs and across Lanarkshire and Ayrshire put one editor in charge of two and three papers. At the Scottish Parliament's Procedures Committee earlier this year the Society of Editors came under attack from MSPs getting their own back at the often negative coverage of their work in Scottish papers. Invited to give evidence, I was naively asked by one MSP, "did I think editors had their own agendas?" The answer was, "yes, at least three each."

It is all a question of accountability. Do the press hold people accountable? Is privacy alive and well? Is anything up for grabs if it is in the public interest - or should that be of interest to the public? Would a Press Commission threaten editorial independence? Who are editors accountable to? Whose independence needs to be protected? Is it the editor with the power to invade privacy, whose appointment and dismissal is entirely in the hands of a commercial employer? Or the journalist or sub-editor instructed to write or change stories they know to be wrong? The publication whose editor and management sell editorial space to advertisers without making it clear to readers that the copy is an advertisement? The public from distorted stories and exclusion of analysis? Or individuals or sections of the public from misrepresentation without the right of reply

What more important task could we require of the media than with equipping citizens with the tools of opinion and fact to help form and run society. Should there be a mechanism to protect or secure the distinctive community and cultural interests of all the people who live in Scotland? Do we need a body that will protect diversity of ownership and plurality of voice in the media? The

answers to the last two questions have to be absolutely of the positive persuasion.

We should be mindful that the Communications Bill is currently proceeding through Westminster and will allow major changes to the provision and ownership of media in Scotland. With that in mind the NUJ and Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom are petitioning the Scottish Parliament for the inclusion of a Member for Scotland on the new regulator OFCOM. While the Communications Bill contains proposals that purport to safeguard high quality programmes, there is no doubt that it will unleash commercial forces that will seek profit ahead of quality and high standards. The campaign for a Press Commission will complement these concerns and raise the awareness of the need for vigilance but also for protective mechanisms - which have teeth.

Not only must they be able to bite, such a commission requires to be representative and, dare I suggest, even democratically accountable. Such a body would require to be resourced to enable it to carry out monitoring on a major scale dealing with complaints with the trust of the public. This of course would be unlike the Press Complaints Commission which appears to have neither bite nor the political make-up or will to address the problems which exist in our industry.

The need to address the shortcomings of the press is not just about complaints, but also the ethics and standards of the media.

We need to encourage, cajole and demand financial and practical support for quality journalism, bringing a return to investigative reporting which is all but dead in the water. A Scottish Press Commission could be part of a standing sub-committee such as the influential Scottish Parliament cross-party group on the media, but inviting representation from relevant groups such as journalists/editors, the NUJ, the Scottish Civic Forum and reputable independent academics/lawyers specialising in the media.

The remit of the SPC would include a mechanism to monitor and deal with the whole range of complaints up to and including inaccuracies and defamation. This of course would require reform of the law. It could lead to the introduction of a Scottish Media Law Bill. Indeed, it might take the country towards a more enlightened and equality-based legal environment. With new complementary legislation including the Freedom of Information

(Scotland) Act, Communications Bill amended to include a Scottish Member of OFCOM, the regulations would not be restrictive but supportive. This new environment could apply the Contempt of Court Act to the thorny issue of paying witnesses in court cases for their story as well as reforming the law of defamation to allow equal access to the law while discouraging gold-diggers or time-wasters.

It would certainly look at issues of censorship, distortion, suppression of stories. For journalists this might require a confidential reporting system run by the SPC which could administer any required action for such whistle-blowing, while providing sufficient protection for those reporting and those reported against. An example of the kind of incident this would cover happened earlier this year, when reporters were angry at the withdrawal of a report of an employment tribunal from a local newspaper which upset a prominent advertiser, who of course had

been found guilty at the tribunal. This type of interference is unacceptable and needs to be exposed and stopped in the future.

I believe there are enough concerned people in this country about the present state of the press - never mind the future - for this campaign to be successful. Indeed there have been links made between the fall in quality of the press and the rise of fascism in this country and the success of the BNP in places like Lancashire. People who work in the industry are concerned at falling standards and abuse of power by editors. Indeed, two journalists recently left their employment because of editorial

interference in their copy. Inside and certainly outside the industry there are many people angry at the levels of intrusion of privacy and the lack of the right of reply. People are concerned at the dumbing-down of serious newspapers, the reduction in quality journalism (including the lack of resources put into investigative reporting), the growth of partisan comment or the trivialisation of important stories which should have been written to inform and the general fall in quality within this essential field of democracy.

A Scottish Press Commission would certainly be a beacon of light shining on the media and - if we are clever - maybe a possible saviour of our plurality, addressing the incredible levels of apathy pervading our society. The debate starts here. ■

Paul Holleran is the Scottish Organiser of the National Union of Journalists

last left writing

William Bonnar interviewed Ian Bell, one of Scotland's best known and respected journalists

Having worked for most of the country's main newspapers over the past 23 years and with the Journalist of the Year award under his belt one would think that Ian would have been part of the comfortable journalistic establishment, happy to write within an agenda set by the capitalist owners of newspapers and government ministers. Instead, fuelled by views which he himself describes as Socialist, Nationalist and Republican, Ian uses his talents and prestige to argue a Left alternative on a wide range of issues; Scotland's answer to John Pilger and Paul Foot. In a country where the Left has its own newspapers and therefore tends to talk to itself and where socialists working in the mainstream media find it difficult to raise their heads above the barricades, Ian has broken the mould. How has he achieved this and more importantly how can we get more journalists to do the things he does.

W.B. Could you start off by outlining your journalistic career to date.

I.B. I don't know if I would describe it as a career and certainly didn't start out wanting to be a journalist. After leaving Edinburgh University in 1978 with a Degree in English/Philosophy, I did a number of jobs including working in a Law Centre, Hospital Porter and Storekeeper. It was only after getting tired of these kinds of jobs that I wrote to the **Scotsman** for work. They took me on in 1979 and I have been working with newspapers ever since; sometimes full time, often freelance. After two or three years at the **Scotsman** I lost my job following a strike and lock out by management. I was the NUJ rep. Since then I have worked for the **Scotsman** again, **Daily Record**, **Glasgow Herald**, **Business AM** and currently work for the **Sunday Herald**.

W.B. Talking about the **Herald**, what is your view of the outcome of the sale of the **Herald** group of papers to Gannett?

I.B. It certainly could have been worse; in terms of ownership and diversity Scotland would have

been very badly served if they had been sold to the Barclay Brothers and been put in the hands of Andrew Neil. The **Herald** does have a reputation for taking a more independent line on a variety of issues and has demonstrated a willingness to reflect diverse views. This would certainly have been the first to go if Andrew Neil had his hands on these papers. Still, the track record of Gannett is not particularly good and there is no grounds for unchecked optimism. Also, another Scottish publication is now in the hands of overseas owners, which cannot be a good thing generally.

W.B. On a more general point, the Scottish Parliament has been bitterly critical of the way it is portrayed in the media. Do you think they are justified in this view?

I.B. You have to separate out the broadcast media and newspapers. The broadcast media has, on the whole, given both extensive and favourable coverage to the Parliament, recognising the central role it now plays in Scottish society. Newspaper coverage has been very different. The **Scotsman**, under Andrew Neil, has been hostile from the start with coverage reduced to negative sniping. The **Daily Record** is now a completely maverick newspaper on this and many other issues. On the one hand its coverage has been extremely negative yet its close links to the Labour Party makes it reluctant to publish anything too damaging to the party. Another problem is that the Parliament is not very experienced at 'handling' the media. To take the example of Henry McLeish. If those allegations had been made against a Westminster Cabinet Member, the government's own media machine would have sprung into action and blown the story away.

W.B. Why is it that you are one of the very few Left journalists who has actually risen to prominence?

I.B. One should not underestimate my role as a 'token Leftie'. The **Sunday Herald** projects itself as a newspaper reflecting a range of political views and

is well aware of the existence of a Left constituency in Scotland; hence the space for my column. On a more general point, newspapers are owned by rich individuals and tend to appoint editors who tend to reflect their point of view. The editor in turn appoints staff who, by and large, reflect his views. Also, most journalists come from middle class, often public school backgrounds, which goes a long way to shape their outlook on the world. For journalists who would represent an alternative view there are obvious career implications.

- W.B.** There has clearly been a revival of the Left in Scotland in recent years with the emergence of the Scottish Socialist Party. How would you account for this?
- I.B.** I think this has been rooted in the transformation of the Labour Party into New Labour. Before, the Left had a significant presence in a Labour Party which in turn could act as vehicle for working class demands and aspirations. This is certainly not the case now. While there still exist some prominent

socialists in the party they are very isolated with little or no prospect of turning things around. The only difference now between New Labour and the Tories is that the former are much more effective in what they do. This has opened up a space on the Left of New Labour which the SSP has filled very effectively. The other reason is generational. There is a new young generation emerging around issues like globalisation which the SSP is well placed to tap into.

- W.B.** In conclusion; are there any specific projects you are working on now?
- I.B.** Yes, I am planning to write a biography of James Connolly who was my great uncle. I think much of what has been written to date has been inadequate with not enough of Connolly the person or his contribution to politics in Scotland. Many people don't even realise that Connolly was Scottish and I want to do while most of the historical records are still intact. ■

Saturday 15th February 2003

March and rally to stop war on Iraq

No more Blood for Oil - Freedom for Palestine!

On Saturday 15th February throughout Europe there will be major demonstrations against war on Iraq. At the SECC in Glasgow the Labour Party will be holding their annual Spring Conference.

Come to the SECC and say "Not In Our Name, Mr Blair!"

11.00 AM Assemble, George Square

12.00 Noon March-off

1.30 PM Surround the SECC

2.30 PM Rally

Scottish Coalition for Justice not War

behind the braziers

Gregor Gall argues that much of the responsibility for how trade unions are being treated lies at the door of the unions themselves

The 'new' Labour government has faced its most serious industrial test since it came to office in 1997 with the firefighters' dispute. Although the outcome of the dispute is far from clear, a number of significant issues have emerged as a result, and a number more can be analysed through the prism of the dispute.

Why has Labour been so vociferous in its condemnation of the firefighters? Setting aside the early mixed messages resulting from Blair's use of Prescott as chief negotiator, Labour has been severe and trenchant in its criticism, on a par with the criticism of Harold Wilson against the 1966 seafarers' strike ('a tightly-knit group of politically motivated men'). This is not because a 16 per cent pay rise without strings would send the economy into a downward spiral and unleash a spring tide of 'me also' 'copy-cat' pay claims. There is limited evidence of either. Rather, it is because the political authority of 'new' Labour has been on the line. Each time 'new' Labour said it would not provide extra funding, the ante was upped and the fall-out from a potential climbdown became greater. More than that, the 'new' Labour project of modernising British capital and society through neo-liberalism and Christian democracy, involving an avowal of 'no return to the seventies!', is at stake. A climbdown would involve being slayed by the ghosts of 'old' Labour as well as a loss of political credibility amongst not only so-called 'Middle England' and the chattering classes but also big business and the (right-wing) media.

It is in this context, building on the epoch of Thatcherism, that 'new' Labour subjugates the interests of labour and its representatives - no matter the recent slight improvements in employment law - to the 'national interest', code for the rights of capital. It attacks the so-called domination by producers (unions) over the interests of consumers (people), signalling its determination to rule in the interests of 'all', again code for capital. Only with this achieved can the supposed endless 'mutual gains' of 'trickledown' economics be fulfilled. Consequently, there is still no positive right to strike in Britain, and striking is regarded as outmoded. 'Social partnership', but without the weight of its continental counterparts, is promulgated. 'Modernisation' in the fire service, as elsewhere, consists of not forward to the future in terms of working conditions but back to the past; longer hours, enforced overtime, increased job insecurity and so on.

So much for the familiar, if nonetheless still correct, left critique. But what lessons and opportunities for the unions and the left are presented by the firefighters' dispute and the current period? Are we in the quiet before

the storm? Are we experiencing a return to militancy? Could the strikes of 2002 prefigure a generalised revolt akin to France's 'hot winter' of 1995 that defeated Juppe's austerity plans and ushered in Jospin?

The level of strike activity for 2002 represents a 50 per cent increase on 2001 (525,000 days 'lost'), and 2000 (499,000 days 'lost') represented a 106 per cent increase on 1999. But the number of strikes has not risen above 300 per annum since 1991. Neither has the number of days 'lost' per thousand risen about 30 per annum since 1991. By contrast, the 1980s saw days 'lost' between 2 million and 5 million per annum (save 1984) and the number of strikes fluctuated between 700 and 1500 per year. Apart from 1984 with the miners' strike, the 1980s, 1990s and today are dwarfed by the 1970s where six of the ten years recorded in excess of 10 million days 'lost' per year and all years experienced more than 2,000 strikes.

Of course such bald statistics are not the be all and end all of how we assess the strength of the union movement, but they do indicate a much higher level of combativity and confidence on the part of workers in previous decades compared to today. Key features of strikes are also whether they record success or not in gaining their objectives, and whether they are defensive or offensive. What should also concern us is that most strikes take place in the public sector, most are relatively timid affairs and most record some kind of compromise, rather than outstanding victories. This location of current strikes indicates, inter alia, that trade unionism is in a weakened state in the private sector, comprising manufacturing and services. The latter part is an area of employment growth, and notwithstanding some significant advances in gaining new union recognition agreements in this area, it is still the case that trade unionism, particularly in the private service sector, is conspicuous by its absence. Recent strikes and those in the 1990s have been largely characterised by a series of one-day actions, involving relatively delimited numbers, not indefinite strikes by all workers concerned. Their results, while encouraging in as much as not being another series of defeats, have not been sufficiently fulsome in gaining their objectives to have reversed the psychological impact of the defeats of the 1980s. These strikes have been overwhelmingly defensive - **against** wages offers and reductions in conditions rather than for restricting management control and gaining influence over the organisation of work.

Of course, union membership has also fallen markedly from 55 per cent density in 1979 to 29 per cent in 2001, representing

13.5 million and 7.5 million members respectively. In 1998, the total membership level stopped falling and in 1999 and 2000 it grew overall by 160,000. Unfortunately, in 2002, it fell by 100,000. Even if this fall in 2001 had not occurred and another small increase had been recorded, union density would have still fallen as the total labour market continues to grow. The union 'mark-up' - the difference between terms and conditions between unionised and non-unionised workplaces - has also fallen sharply from around 10 per cent, according to the latest British Social Attitudes survey. If membership continues to fall, it is likely the union mark-up will continue to fall similarly, reducing the (instrumental) incentive to collectivise. This downward trajectory is despite the considerable resources put into the recruiting and organising, epitomised by the TUC's Organising Academy, launched in 1997, and the falling level of real unemployment. Here the situation is much akin to that of the labour movement in the US - resources expended for little gain, other than not to have even greater falls in membership. Nonetheless, the situation in Britain suggests that a slow but faltering recovery over many years is possible, rather than probable.

But under conditions could we foresee a genuinely significant increase in union power and influence? Laying to rest old demons of Thatcherism and 'new' Labour, trade unions are, no matter their faults and imperfections (of which they are many), by far and away the most democratic, representative and inclusive of all organisations in Britain. They hold out the possibility not merely of democratising and civilising society as a whole, but in particular bringing representation to the grossly underrepresented and ignored. These people are workers, the vast majority of society. So what is needed?

First, repeal of the anti-union legislation introduced by the Tories between 1979 and 1997. While Thatcher may have believed in the 'free market' and the small state, this required extensive state intervention to 'outlaw', i.e. removed immunity from, ways in which unions could agglomerate their resources through secondary action, mass, secondary and flying picketing and so on to counter-act those of the employer. Despite the **Employment Relations Act 1999** and its review, 'new' Labour has made it clear that 'there will be no return to the seventies'. To paraphrase Andy Gilchrist, FBU general secretary, 'new' Labour needs to be replaced by 'real'

Labour to bring about (real) 'fairness at work'. But this, in itself, is not the whole story. Laws have been broken and rendered ineffective before - witness the **Industrial Relations Act 1971** and the 'Pentonville Five'. The unions, and particularly their leaderships, are responsible for the self-policing and narrowed horizons that have made the Tories' legislation so effective. Given that patient argument and lobbying have not brought about repeal or the establishment of a charter for workers' rights, muscles need to be flexed.

Second, and flowing from this, the nature of the unions' relationship with Labour is brought into sharp relief. Tactically, disaffiliation is probably a step too far, too soon for most union members but democratising the political fund,

sponsoring only certain MPs and paying less to Labour are not. Neither would be trading financial support to Labour for specific commitments à la 'best value'. Support for the Scottish Socialist Party and Socialist Alliance amongst certain unions is such that they could begin to become more credible opponents to Labour with union support. Arguments of 'better inside the tent than out' would begin to be undermined. Taking a cue from the RMT, only sponsoring MPs who are prepared to campaign for union policy is one useful means. Only the naïve could expect that this would not lead to increased antagonism from new Labour.

This would mean, thirdly, that unions must also begin to exercise that power which they still command. Seven and a half million members can be mobilised collectively on

the streets and in the workplaces. Leadership is needed. Grievances do abound. Workers are not happy and secure. A demonstration of 500,000 for a decent wage or rights at work is both necessary and possible. Union leadership vigorously campaigning for, and leading, strikes to stop attacks on workers' conditions would go a long way making striking a widespread and effective bargaining tool. This will be the real test of the 'awkward squad' of new union leaders. Notions of partnership would be eclipsed in this. In the process, unions will become more credible and grow, as happened before in 1910-1914 and 1968-1974. 'History' never repeats itself exactly, but it does generate certain lessons that those in unions and the left would do well to dwell upon and act upon. ■

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The unions, and particularly their leaderships, are responsible for the self-policing and narrowed horizons that have made the Tories' legislation so effective

the nuclear option

Corrina Thomson argues that cheap electricity hides the massive public subsidies paid to a failed nuclear energy policy

Trouble might come to your door but you don't invite it in, as my grandma always says. When she was growing up, the world believed in 'atoms for peace'. She moved to Caithness after being told that nuclear electricity from Dounreay would be free for everyone. That was many years ago and now everything has changed. No one believes that old nonsense about hip hip hooray, we love atomic energy and glowing electricity man on the TV zapping pylons round the world with bolts of cheap nuclear electricity. We all know atomic power isn't cheap, so why on earth is the UK Energy Minister saying that we must have lots of new nuclear plants or we're all doomed. The Labour Party in Scotland, or New Labour as it is sometimes known, sits and watches this Westminster tango with the nuclear industry like mute sheep.

In February last year, the UK 'Performance and Innovation Unit' Energy Review singled out the American AP-1000 Megawatt reactor and said that uranium is plentiful, cheap and easy to store. "This means that nuclear power is essentially an indigenous form of energy," it concluded. Presumably somehow more indigenous than the tide or the wind or the mountains used for hydropower.

Thereafter followed months of whispering that Labour was moving towards new nuclear stations. In 2001, the UK Government launched a consultation on radioactive waste. The paper began: "More than 10,000 tonnes of radioactive waste are safely stored in the UK, but await a decision on their long-term future". I wonder what evidence was studied to decide on the term "safely stored" or if the 10,000 tonnes includes the toxic, potentially explosive cocktail of nuclear waste sitting in an unlined hole in the ground at Dounreay.

Of late, there has also been hefty use of the notion that somehow new nuclear plants will not really produce atomic waste, and if they do, it will be cute and fluffy new waste, not nasty 'historical legacy' waste, (which is, of course, safely stored). Many things in the nuclear industry have become, in true Orwellian style, 'historical legacies', which conveniently shifts responsibility to an undefined point in the past that is not relevant today and, therefore, should not be discussed. Dounreay's current reprocessing contracts have suddenly become "historical". Reprocessing has stopped but the contracts still stand and will probably go off to Sellafield. But that's alright and can be deemed as 'legacy' waste, which isn't really anything to do with new nuclear stations because they won't be anything to do with existing nuclear institutions.

This doublethink appears to be fully supported and regurgitated by the Labour Party. As a journalist in Caithness, I have interviewed a series of Scottish Executive politicians who spend a few hours in one of the plants at Dounreay and then warmly support the UK Atomic Energy Authority business slogan "restoring the environment". I liked the glowing electricity man when I was wee and I wanted to see him zapping pylons with free atomic electricity, but then I grew up and realised he didn't exist.

I don't know what the point in these visits is, as the politicians invariably don't know anything about site operations and show no evidence of understanding how serious the problem of aging nuclear waste is. A rather unflattering article in a UK financial newspaper accused the Energy Minister, Brian Wilson, of being all wind. Shortly afterwards articles mysteriously appeared about the great proposals of British Energy to build new reactors at various locations, including at Hunterston in Mr Wilson's constituency. Soon afterwards British Energy was dragged into admitting that it can't even afford a tissue to dry its shareholders' eyes let alone build a 'new generation' of atom stations. So the Government takes the money the consumer has saved from cheaper electricity, in the form of tax, and hands it over to British Energy. Oh, sorry... um, electorate. I thought cheaper electricity was a good idea but now I've changed my mind.

The shrewd policy of New Labour is to give a private generating company millions of pounds and issue a bit more hot air about wind farms. Atoms for peace has become atoms for taxpayers money and the nuclear generators must be rubbing their hands with glee thinking of the public money that will be poured into their private coffers by the Bank of Short-Sighted Energy Policy. The national grid needs large, consistent outputs that could easily be provided by hydropower. Hydro is reliable, straightforward and does not add to the nuclear waste problem, but I don't recall the Government saying anything of consequence about hydro at all. Perhaps it is more worried about what the environment quangos will say about 'rare' corncrakes than the mountains of atomic rubbish everyone chooses to ignore.

There is no palpable Government support for tidal power despite the fact that the tides are continual, whereas wind farms may only produce one third of their possible output because of unpredictable weather. Labour is putting all its eggs in the one basket by throwing money at the nuclear industry and assuming it will be more palatable to the public if some wind farms are built. Taken to its conclusion, a combination of nuclear and wind power, the country will

be covered in makeshift atomic waste stores and wind turbines that only produce power intermittently. Of course, with nuclear power we won't have any money either.

Strangely, there has been no announcement from the Department of Trade and Industry or the Scottish Executive to advise the public that they are to pay for a private company, British Energy, to exacerbate the nuclear waste problem. Westminster blinkers have also been applied to Nirex, the agency responsible for final disposal of radioactive waste. Expert groups, environmentalists, select committees and various others have advised the Government that Nirex should be independent of the nuclear industry. This separation has worked in other countries and it stands to reason that it is unethical and unaccountable for the industry to call the shots when it comes to waste disposal. Westminster has ignored all this and still lets the industry big boys run their own waste programme.

If I were anti-nuclear, the Labour Party would horrify me as it might as well be sending flowers and chocolates to the nuclear industry. And by the same token, if I were pro-nuclear, I would be equally horrified by the Labour Party because it shows all the evidence of not understanding how the nuclear industry works. For example, why would any right-thinking individual support the construction of several huge 1000-megawatt advanced pressurised water reactors by a private company that has no money? Why choose a reactor that has never been built to that size anywhere in the world and then replicate the experiment at many other sites, when only a few months ago a series of reactors in the UK had to be shut down because of a generic design fault?

Finland recently decided to go ahead with one new nuclear power station. That's one, yes, one. Finnish politicians

were not whispering to journalists that it's six or nine or twelve plants, if not - the lights go out forever! It doesn't take very much to see that the UK energy policy is just garbage. There's no common sense, no vision and no backbone to stand up the uneconomic generators. More worryingly, the support for nuclear power does not appear to be based on an understanding of the nuclear industry, for example the problem of a gross shortage of nuclear inspectors and a conspicuous lack of nuclear waste policy. A new waste policy is postponed indefinitely by lengthy consultation and Nirex remains in thrall to the industry.

Unfortunately, this is our energy policy because we are paying for it - and giving millions and millions to a private company. Just don't suggest for a second that it should be nationalised though, that's not adhering to privatisation dogma. But you won't hear a peep about that from the Executive coalition at Holyrood. Its soundbite is that it supports renewables and would need a solution to the nuclear waste problem before considering new nuclear. Maybe someone should tell the Westminster Government, because at the moment it's throwing our money at British Energy and pretending the waste problem doesn't exist.

Scottish Left Review can exclusively reveal the contents of next year's Labour energy policy review: "Nuclear power - yes, please. At any cost". And for those who believe Holyrood is too amateur to come up with a valid energy policy, they need only look at the garbage that passes for an energy policy at Westminster. My grandma could do better than that. She'd say that British Energy may come to your door, but you don't invite it in and hand it your children's savings books. ■

Corrina Thomson is a journalist

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Samual Peep's Diary



Remembering Woy of the Wadicals

Much anecdote has filled the Diary columns since the passing of Lord Jenkins of Hillhead. Much concerned his difficulty with the Glasgow vernacular. In 1985 some of his party activists decided to make the trip to the annual conference in Torquay. This also doubled up as their annual holiday. "And are you off on holiday this year" he inquired of one local member. "Oh aye Roy, I'm aff to Torquay". "Yes" he mused, before adding "Istanbul is lovely at this time of the year". Silly ranker.

How Many Nats to Change a Lightbulb?

Politicians loved to be fussed over. It makes them feel important. However we feel the recent launch of the SNP's pre-election manifesto in Glasgow did go well over the top. Question: How many officials does it take to hold John Swinney's hand before and after press conferences? Well judging by the turnout of officialdom on January 13th the answer is a senior press officer, a chief executive, a chief

of staff, a personal assistant, a research director and Nicola Sturgeon. How big will the entourage be when the serious campaigning starts?

Bruised – But Not the Lanarkshire Way

Poor First Minister. No sooner had the New Year started than Wishaw man had head butted the pavement outside of Bute House. One Lanarkshire MSP was asked, "Do you think the scab and the stitches do a lot for his street cred?" The reply was quick and to the point "Naw. He would have to have been chibbed for that". Needless to say the MSP in question did not say if he would have preferred this course of action. ■



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.

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