

Scottish Left Review

Issue 92 March/April 2016 - £2.00

'best re(a)d'

An illustration of a boat with a Scottish flag on a river. The river is filled with crocodiles, each with a label: 'Continued austerity', 'Brexit', 'Labour Meltdown', 'Fiscal Settlement', and 'An uncertain economy'. The background shows a waterfall on the left and mountains in the distance.

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comment

waiting for the great leap forward

Two things look likely to happen on the morning of 6 May 2016 – we will wake up to a large SNP majority government and reduced voter turnout compared to the referendum. The two are linked in the past, present and future. From both pro- and anti- independence sides of the left, understanding the changing terrain of this aspect of Scottish politics will be vital.

The beauty of the referendum campaign was that both sides could have varying interpretations and visions of independence and union. Despite the power and resources of the Better Together and Yes Scotland campaigns, others like the Campaign for Socialism (CfS)/

Red Paper Collective, Labour for Independence (Lfi) and the Radical Independence Campaign (RIC) also had the opportunity to pitch in with their visions. This was especially so because the actual question on the ballot paper did not specify exactly what voting ‘yes’ or ‘no’ would entail. In other words, the political process was quite an open one.

Contrast this with the 5 May election. All the parties, large and small, have manifestos which are closed off from influence from the public. Decided by combinations of party members, party leaders and party spin doctors, the sense of inter-party competition is much greater as the prize of seats at Holyrood is a much more tangible outcome. There

is very little room for the likes of CfS, Lfi or RIC to make waves.

This then makes the election process a more closed off one, less lively, more choreographed and so on. Even with the technical changes to voter registration and the changed limit, the turnout will be lower.

For those that do vote, the most important issue is not one that many will have thought of so far. It is how will the SNP fare after 5 May 2016 as not just a majority government with new powers but as one with a leader who is no longer newly in post and is well practiced in the art of radical sounding rhetoric outdoing practical performance?

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Cover and illustrations:

Nadia Lucchesi
(nadia.shemail@gmail.com)

Proofing services:

Bob Thomson and John Daly

Communications and organisational development:

Carole Ewart

Trade union development officer:

David Brockett

Editor Email:

G.Gall@bradford.ac.uk

Web: www.scottishleftreview.org

Tel: 0141 424 0042

Address:

Scottish Left Review,
741 Shields Road, Pollokshields,
Glasgow G41 4PL

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It was no radical, *Herald* columnist, David Torrance, who asked recently how long can the SNP get away being so successful but with delivering so little? For the left, there seem to be three possible options on the table. First, a move from within the SNP by its left to change the situation. Second, the left in Scottish Labour steps up to the plate. Or, third, RISE – Scotland’s Left Alliance or Solidarity become sizable, credible forces as the SSP once was.

Right now none seem very likely. Some of the answers are to be found just over the Irish Sea after the republics’ general election (using proportional representation and multi-member seats) on 26 February 2016. Despite the political and economic crisis since 2008, the two longstanding parties, Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil, continue to dominant albeit at a reduced level now of less than 50% of first preferences for the first time since the 1980s. Labour crashed (to just 7 TDs) after being in government with Fine Gael while Sinn Fein has risen to 23 TDs. The left alliances,

parties and individuals (Anti-Austerity Alliance/People before Profit, Social Democrats, Independents 4 Change etc) have amongst them some 15 TDs (out of 158 in the Dail).

The SNP has monopolized centre-left politics in Scotland, creating something akin to a one-party state, so a challenge from within is some time off especially as the SNP is a centralized operation with powers of patronage. Prominent individuals on the left do not seem willing or able to challenge Sturgeon and Swinney. Scottish Labour still looks unable to shed its ‘new’ Labour skin, indicating political renewal is a long and drawn out process. RISE or Solidarity not only must make more than a minor breakthrough but use this as a base to rapidly develop. Here, the lesson of the Irish radical left’s success is that it already had parliamentary representation, its main parts formed a united front, it has well developed, charismatic leaders and has been to the fore over big material struggles (bin tax, austerity, water charges). These might then be seen as making up the necessary and sufficient conditions for

lift off.

Brexit or McStay? There are left arguments for both as we show in this edition. The problem is trying to change the EU from without or within on a left basis is not credible right now because the left is so weak and enfeebled. If there is a vote to stay in, it will leave Cameron, Osborne and another ‘project fear’ with the upper hand. If there is a vote to exit, it will leave Johnson, Farage and their ‘project fear’ with the upper hand. Which is worse? Which is the devil we already know? Maybe these are the realistic terms of the debate we should be having rather than ‘freedom from neo-liberalism via independence’ or ‘another Europe is possible’.

We are delighted to have two feedback pieces in this issue as well as an array of articles that touch on and delve into some of the issues raised in this editorial. Our next issue will analyse the outcome of the Scottish Parliament election and more arguments on the 23 June referendum.



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From MA to BA

Graeme Arnott argues the middle class is now after what used to be working class in its search for employment opportunities

Margaret and Jim Cuthbert's piece on Modern Apprenticeships (MA) in the last issue was a timely piece, in many ways according with Channel 4's *Dispatches: Low Pay Britain* (18 January 2016) demonstrating that unscrupulous employers found new ways with old tools to exploit young workers. It's vital the Scottish left articulates a critical understanding of vocational education and training given that the MA framework is a devolved matter straddling the education and skills portfolios.

The Scottish Government's implementation plan, following on from the Wood Commission, is outlined in *Developing the Young Workforce* and includes the development of an advanced apprenticeship with pilot activity rolled out across the country in 2018-19. At present, the Scottish Qualifications Credit Framework (SCQF) recognises three different categories of apprenticeship: MAs (SVQ 3), technical apprenticeships (SVQ 4) and professional apprenticeships (SVQ 5).

The Cuthberts argued re-appraising the MA programme is necessary to revitalise our manufacturing so to better compete internationally. What will make that transformation possible, they argue, is a highly skilled workforce in the types of (relevant) trades which would include maths, science, engineering, IT and electrical. They concluded though on criticism of the MA framework, arguing one solution to the problem would be to improve pathways to degree-level qualifications.

At present most construction and the electro-technical MAs sit a little beneath HNC level on the SCQF. In the 1980s, when I served my time, the (SCOTVEC) HNC was an entirely academic course. It bore no

relation to my workplace, although in fairness, it wasn't really intended to do so. It was the qualification that got you 'off the tools'.

The HNC wasn't designed to make me a better or more productive electrician. It was intended to put clear academic water between me, as a possible future manager, and the manual workers that it was ultimately intended that I would manage. It was all about status.

One thing to note from the Cuthberts' piece is that we are in the world of capital letters: Modern Apprenticeship not modern apprenticeship. Since its introduction, the MA has evolved from an employer-centred solution to youth training to become a brand – one robustly marketed by the Coalition, and now the Tory Government at Westminster, and the SNP Scottish Government. Like any brand, the product itself is not so important. Instead, what matters is the extent to which the image can be marketed as a lifestyle or life choice, especially now that qualifications by themselves are no longer a guarantee of employment.

Marx admired the bourgeoisie's energy - its ability to clarify, define and realize its objectives. The energetic bourgeoisie surveyed its own labour-market territory. Finding it precarious, it looks to new territory to create new opportunities. The squeezed middle has its sights set on MAs.

Faced with downward mobility and automation of many (white-collar) occupations, the 21st century class solution is to acknowledge that what was disdained is now attractive. Those manual labour jobs they wouldn't have dirtied their hands applying for have suddenly become a lot more attractive as long-term career options. Computers may

be able to perform operations at lightning speed but they can't yet tile a bathroom, mend a leaky roof or install a new outside light. Can these tasks be automated? Possibly, but not any time soon.

The codicil to this has to be manual labour bears the hallmarks of academic learning. This would be a win-win solution for the middle-class and the Scottish Government. The degree will redeem the MAs brand which has lately been tarnished by corporate malpractice whilst the degree will redeem the redundant 'go straight to middle-management' pass that a university education degree once provided. Redemption to the redeemer! In a sense, it appears a graduate MA scheme would be nothing more than an attempt to bolster the bourgeoisie's faith in education and work by securing for them the most secure non-automatable jobs available.

Education systems are designed to polarise, and if there is one single law of capitalism, Corinne Maier writes, it's that for there to be winners there must also be losers. The vast majority of current apprentices in both the construction and electrical sectors are from working-class backgrounds, leaving school at the end of fourth year without university entry qualifications. Is it to be the case that a graduate MA framework creates the circumstances for workplace gentrification whereby working-class school pupils find themselves squeezed out of apprenticeships?

Graeme Arnott is a workplace rep for Unite. He works with electrical apprentices.

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Edifice of an argument built on foundations of sand

Derek Torrie says not renewing Trident will indeed cost thousands of jobs

I read with some interest - and an increasingly sinking feeling - the article by Mike Danson in the last issue called 'Accounting for Trident'. As Convenor of the manual unions for Babcock at the Clyde Naval Base, I am used to all sorts of public debate taking place about the jobs my members and the other thousands of people who work at the base do. However, Mike Danson's piece hit a new low in terms of misunderstanding what happens at the base and how many jobs rely on Britain's nuclear submarine fleet being based there.

Danson repeated a claim that only 520 people at the Clyde rely directly on Trident for their jobs. This is based on a Freedom of Information request tabled by Scottish CND in 2012. The answer given by the MoD is accurate but would confuse most casual observers and Danson has sought to capitalise on this confusion.

'Trident' is the name of the missile system used on the nuclear deterrent Vanguard Class submarines (or SSBNs in MoD speak). 'Trident' has also entered into common parlance as short hand for the whole deterrent system, including the submarines. So when the MoD says 520 work on Trident, they mean the missiles.

In fact, 6,500 people at HMNB Clyde depend on the submarine fleet being based there and this will increase to 8,000 when the new Successor submarines come into service. It is also worth pointing out that HMNB Clyde is the home base for Britain's Astute submarines, which are nuclear powered but conventionally

armed (or SSNs). It is not clear from Danson's article whether he is in favour of, or opposed to, nuclear powered submarines with conventional weapons being housed on the Clyde, but many of those who call for 'Trident' to be scrapped also call for a nuclear free Scotland and that, presumably, means removing Astutes and Vanguards.

Danson spends many column inches explaining how it is a relatively straightforward task to redeploy 520 people, but his whole argument is based on a false premise. It is like asking how many people at Glasgow Airport directly rely on planes landing or taking off for their jobs, and then answering it is only the people who drive the tractors to move planes to the runway, or the people who wave them in with their lollipops. In reality, of course, without planes there would be no airport. It is exactly the same at HMNB Clyde - no submarines = no base and no jobs.



Diversification seems to be coming back into vogue on the left. In reality, many of our union comrades in the defence industry have been arguing for diversification for decades, with little success. This has been due to lack of political will, a reluctance

on the part of defence companies to diversify, barriers to entry in new or adjacent markets, or a combination of all. Danson points out the US enacted legislation to force diversification. That is true, but it builds in long timescales and significant investment, neither of which have historically been present in Britain. Where there has been success, for instance with our sister site at Rosyth, long-term, secure jobs in defence have been replaced with insecure short-term work with much reduced employment numbers.

I have no problem in debating the merits of a diversification policy, but it would take a brave and foolhardy convenor to stand up in front of members in jobs that will be secure for decades with good terms and conditions and ask them to put that at risk on the basis of a political principle.

I represent real people in real jobs, with real families to house, clothe and feed. If we are going to talk about diversification, let's have a grown up, well-informed debate, not an exercise in posture politics and selective vision. Ignoring inconvenient facts serves no-one in such a debate and will only serve to further alienate thousands of workers at HMNB Clyde whose futures many seem keen to debate, but few do so on the basis of truth.

Derek Torrie became a shop steward and safety rep in 1996 for the AEEU union, becoming a full-time convenor in 2001, continuing to undertake this role today for the Unite union. He is employed by Babcock and works at HMNB Clyde (Faslane & Coulport).

Flawed process leads to damaging deal

Jim Cuthbert argues the SNP has not gained a 'no detriment' deal

Just as it is often said 'the child is father to the man', it is also true that the way a negotiation is conducted will leave indelible marks on the resulting deal. This is very much the case with the negotiations leading to the recently agreed fiscal settlement. So before considering how the fiscal settlement will adversely affect social justice in Scotland, it is worth considering the flaws in the negotiating process which have led to a poor deal.

The fiscal settlement negotiations were a classic case of the Treasury ruthlessly getting its own way. The first thing the Treasury did was to secure agreement that the negotiating process should be conducted in secret. This removed what should have been the Scottish Government's strongest potential weapon – namely, the tide of public anger which might have arisen if the public had been aware of the course the negotiations were taking. Secondly, secrecy allowed Westminster to exploit its expertise in news management to ensure that what did enter the public domain in the mainstream media was a highly selective view of the issues.

The next Treasury success was to successfully limit the scope of the negotiations, making sure that two important features were taken as givens, even though neither had been implicit in the original Smith agreement. One was that the adjustment to the abatement to the Scottish Government's block grant should be calculated using tax revenues in rUK (i.e., the amount of tax collected) rather than tax

base (the aggregate of taxable incomes). The effect is to expose Scotland to a whole new class of risk.

But critically, the other restriction the Treasury achieved was to limit consideration to variants of what has come to be known as Holtham indexation. In other words, the amount which is subtracted off from Scotland's block grant will grow, in some way or other, in line with growth in rUK tax revenues. All such arrangements have the effect of pitching Scotland into an economic race with rUK: if you don't grow your tax revenues as fast, you will be penalised. Note that in the original Smith agreement all that said was that some suitable form of indexation should be used.

Finally, the Treasury's clincher was to adopt as its starting position an extreme variant: on the Treasury's originally preferred option, Scotland would have had to grow its tax receipts 13% faster than rUK simply to have kept the same funding we would have had under Barnett. This should have been laughed off the table immediately – but wasn't. The upshot was the Treasury was able to present its eventual 'reluctant' move from this position as a negotiating triumph for the Scots, even though we ended up in another part of the restricted space specified by the Treasury.

So what emerged from this flawed process was a flawed deal, one where we have to grow our tax revenues at least as fast as rUK or be penalised. This brings us then to the central question: do we have adequate economic powers to give us a worthwhile chance

of success in this economic race with rUK? The answer is no. After all, it's not just that monetary policy is made for south east England, not for us. In addition, the Scottish Government will have control of only a single major tax, income tax; it will have restricted borrowing powers; and it lacks control of competition policy, international trade development, licensing of North Sea oil, utility regulation, and a number of labour market responsibilities.

At some point, Scotland will inevitably slip behind in the economic race. The danger is we'll then get into a self-perpetuating cycle of higher taxes, further economic decline, cuts in public services, and ever increasing austerity. There is little hope, given this prospect, of achieving fundamental social change in the brave, new post-Smith Scotland. Indeed, quite the reverse. A very senior Treasury official let slip, during the course of the negotiations, that he thought Scotland's most powerful economic weapon would be the ability to lower the higher rates of income tax relative to rUK, and to turn Scotland into a haven for the rich. There is a risk that, under extreme fiscal pressure, some future Scottish government might be tempted to implement such a socially disastrous policy.

Jim Cuthbert is an independent statistician and his analysis of the fiscal settlement can be found on the Jimmy Reid Foundation website (<http://reidfoundation.org/>)

Fair tax policy

Gordon Morgan argues tax policy divisions are growing

Tax policies alongside spending priorities will be a key battleground. Precursors are Labour and LibDem proposals to raise income tax by 1p for 2016-17, thereby, increasing revenue by £490m less rebates. This was to offset a 2% cut in the Westminster block grant (WBG).

With all income tax bands and thresholds being devolved from May 2017 and Westminster austerity set to further cut the WBG, arguments over tax and spending priorities will continue. National insurance, VAT, corporation tax, fuel duty, tobacco and alcohol taxes will remain reserved taxes.

From 2017, taxes raised in Scotland will with unchanged rates contribute £19,200m towards Scottish Government and local authority expenditure of around £42,200m. The remaining £23,000m will come through the WBG and assigned taxes such as 50% of VAT revenue. The main devolved taxes (2017 estimates) will be income tax (£13,200m); council tax (CT, £2,000m); non domestic rates (£3,000m); land and building transaction (£550m); air passenger duty (APD, £300m); and landfill (£150m).

There is clearly a mood by most parties to use these new powers to offset Tory cuts and provide new benefits and services. There is also a commitment to modify or replace the regressive CT. There agreement ends and differences of approach to tax policy arise.

The SNP will allow councils to raise CT by 3% (£70m) and also increase the top rate by around 20% with low earning households excluded (£100m for education). Thus, properties that are 15 times more valuable would be charged 3.6 times the lowest valued band. SNP has committed to increasing annual childcare expenditure by £440m by 2020 and reducing APD by half

costing £150m by 2018. It has made no announcements on income tax, seeming to be wary about increasing the top rate due to 'behaviour responses' despite supporting a rise for Britain.

Labour wishes to introduce a 50p top rate of tax, support an immediate 2p rise in CT and oppose a cut in APD. Scottish Greens want a land value tax to replace CT. This would be based on the value of property and land and they see it as akin to a wealth tax particularly on large estates and land banks. Their income tax proposals are unclear and they voted against Labour's 1p rise. They oppose a cut in APD on environmental grounds.

Solidarity and RISE both support replacing CT with a Scottish service tax, which is an income tax amendment introducing new bands but raising equivalent revenue to CT to be assigned to local authorities. Most households would pay less. In Solidarity's case, this is allied to taxes on second homes and unproductive land. The LibDems have committed themselves to a 1p rise in income tax, but seem to want a local income tax to replace CT.

How much would these proposals raise and how fair' would they be?

Property Tax: Evidence to the tax commission estimated that a 0.79% annual tax on the value of residential properties would raise the same as CT. Owners of an average house in Scotland valued at £168,000 would pay £1,327. A flat worth £80,000 would be charged £632. A house worth £2,000,000 would pay £15,800. With appropriate rebates this is more progressive than CT, reasonably easy to collect and as it would be used for local services probably seen as 'fair'. It could also be charged on second homes and vacant property. Introducing more CT bands at the higher level allied to revaluation would have similar effects.

Land Tax: A land value tax would

essentially tax undeveloped and productive land such as farms, grouse moors etc. Mostly these are not taxed at present so this would be additional revenue. The main advantage is that land cannot move and the levy would be against owners of land which could include absentee or foreign owners. Economically, it is a tax on speculation and could be accompanied by rebates for productive usage e.g. farmers. More research is required to determine the revenue that could be raised.

Income Tax: Adding 1p to the basic and higher rates could bring in £500m. In 2011, there were 13,000 top rate tax payers in Scotland earning £3,700m. In 2017, there are likely to be 17,000 earning £5,000m. Much of this income will, however, be investment and dividends which are not devolved taxes. Only around £3,000m may be subject to additional Scottish taxes. So on average only £25,000 of income above £150,000 would be subject to a higher rate. Setting the top rate at 50p, would only raise £20m. Introducing slightly higher taxes at £43,000, when National Insurance is no longer paid and the marginal tax rate drops, and possibly at £70,000 and £100,000 would generate far more income and be generally seen as fairer. Tax evasion would be less than with a large increase to the top rate.

No one tax will provide a 'fair' outcome. Some income tax rises can maintain services. Large top rate tax rises only in Scotland are too easy for the rich to avoid. Property and land taxes can act as wealth taxes. A combination of all of these is probably 'fair'.

Gordon Morgan wrote the Financial Memorandum for the Scottish Service Tax Bill in 2005.

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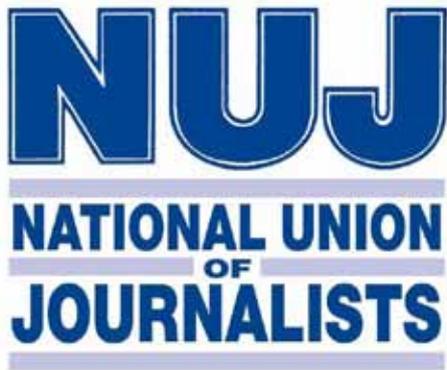


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Quality jobs + social justice = better society

Dave Moxham argues that quality employment and redistribution drive a better, more equal economy

During the referendum, grandiose claims were made on both sides of the debate. One was continuing union was the best guarantor of economic security, redistributive UK-wide institutions and against a race to the bottom on tax and employment rights. The other was the union locked Scotland into endless austerity, a centralised London-centric economy, bad employments and regressive tax.

Whilst this debate is far from over, the centre-left ambitions of the larger parties, the SNP's general election landslide, Corbyn's victory and the devolution of new powers could combine to allow a policy centred debate to develop in the period ahead.

The STUC has begun the process of releasing a range of key manifesto demands which, culminating at our Congress, will combine to form a policy prescription for mitigating the impacts of austerity; re-asserting union rights and the centrality of collective bargaining; and creating quality employment in Scotland.

The next Scottish Government will inherit year-on-year real terms decreases in funding and fragile growth on top of years of austerity. In this context, to exaggerate its capacity to mitigate (let alone reverse) austerity would be a mistake. Redistributive taxation must play its part. The current technical debate over progressivity in the context of Labour's 1p tax plan has obscured that economies which redistribute more, irrespective of progressivity, are fairer and generally more successful.

The vast majority of devolved public spending and benefits in Scotland are universal. Universalism is a good thing but requires both sufficiently progressive and large redistribution to sustain it. Correcting the lamentable state of local

authority funding whilst providing quality health care and protecting key pledges on education will be impossible without further revenues.

The STUC is, therefore calling on all parties to commit to the use of income tax to increase revenues for public services for the next Parliament. The STUC has been disappointed by recent reforms to the Council Tax. A more ambitious set of proposals is a necessity from all parties if local taxation is to function properly and local autonomy and democracy increase.



The STUC supports the devolution of employment rights to the Scottish Parliament. However, this issue is unlikely to be resolved soon. Nevertheless, we believe there is range of actions government can take to protect workers from the excesses of the Trade Union Bill through requiring public authorities to comply with the human rights obligations in the Scotland Act.

The Parliament also has key powers on public service delivery, procurement, the use of its own resources to support industry and the newly devolved power over employment tribunals which can be combined to protect workers' rights, promote collective and sectoral bargaining and give unions the capacity and justice architecture to enable them to seek justice for members. We will be calling on all parties to agree to introduce a Bill in the first year of the Scottish Parliament.

Whilst a future Scottish

Government's scope is limited by its powers, it should act to implement a manufacturing strategy by providing necessary resources to a Scottish Business Development Bank and Cooperative Development Scotland. Public ownership should be promoted, through the removal of the requirement to competitively tender rail and ferry services. Meanwhile action is possible and necessary to ensure fruits of growth are distributed on a more even geographical basis within Scotland through funding of key infrastructure in peripheral economies and with a focus on foundational sectors. The current *Business Pledge* is not fit for purpose and must be developed into a credible with Government/agency support conditional on fair employment and independent assessment

The devolution of powers over housing benefit and the increased borrowing powers provide the potential for a much more ambitious public housing programme. A significant increase in the volume of public house building, with a consequent increase in construction and related employment, the introduction of rent controls and potential housing benefit savings could combine to create a virtuous circle of growth and improvement in core standards of living.

In addition to finally scrapping the bedroom tax, the next Scottish Government should commit to topping up benefits for those most in need. Whilst it is unlikely that the available revenues could ever meet the extent of need, people in Scotland will expect some significant action over the course of the Scottish Parliament to tackle the worst impact on austerity.

Dave Moxham is the deputy general secretary of the Scottish Trades Union Congress (STUC)

Socialist economic thinking in the 21st century

Standing back from party politics, Andrew Cumbers asks what should the economy look like

In the previous issue, Cat Boyd argued for a socialism that was anti-capitalist and in 'favour of economic planning'. While I would agree with this and am generally supportive of RISE, the use of these phrases without sufficient elaboration reveals a continuing lack of a more systematic economic analysis by many on the left. What does economic planning really mean in 2016 (rather than 1945 or 1973)? And while it is a call to arms for the faithful, how can we be anti-capitalist when it comes to talking about how the economy should be organised and run in Scotland when we live under global capitalism?

During my SSP membership, I despaired at the lack of debate on what contemporary alternative economic strategy would look like. Going beyond arguments about socialism in one country, how should we come to terms with globalisation and the failures of older models of socialism? Typically, people's eyes either glazed over when you brought up the subject, or you were met with the old canards, socialist planning and nationalisation. Occasionally, if pressed about what this would mean practically, you got the answer 'Of course, we don't want to nationalise fish and chip shops'.

These remain critical and yet largely unresolved issues. What, under actually existing socialist economies, would be the relationship between: individual/ collective ownership; the private versus public realm; individual liberty versus social equality; collective learning versus individual entrepreneurialism, competition versus collaboration, and markets versus planning. All these are pertinent to any well-functioning economy if it is to sustain itself over time.

Those who have read my recent *Reclaiming Public Ownership: Making Space for Economic Democracy* (Zed, 2012) will know I share Cat's desire for more planning of our economy, particularly in the battle against climate change. Of all our privatised utilities, energy proves the folly of *faux* market solutions to critical public policy issues requiring long-term patient investment and a strategic overview.

I also argue for an economy far more collectively owned than at present, although I advocate a diversified and decentred model of public ownership, which includes cooperatives and far more forms of localised state ownership. Broader public participation – not just of workers but also consumers and those denied, or no longer in, work – is critical for a more radical economic democracy.

We need greater localism, but not at the expense of overall strategic direction and a broader national and internationalist commitment to social and environmental justice. This is why, from a left political economy perspective, I also support staying in the European Union – for all the failings of its current political and business elite.

Turning back to ownership issues, where should the line be drawn between public and private? The most compelling argument for public ownership remains securing the 'commanding heights' of the economy. But I'd replace 'the workers' with 'the common good'. The key economic problem is not so much to secure the 'fruits of their labour' for workers (although we do need better redistribution of income for the average worker) but to allow the broader public to control the 'surplus' produced from the

economy, and put it to good use to invest for our collective future both as a country and for the planet.

That means owning the most important strategic sectors of the economy: banking, energy, transport, and arguably greater communal control over land, without resorting to a Soviet-style state appropriation. There are plenty of other areas of life where commodified relations should have no place in decent society: health, education and water being obvious. However, there are other parts of the economy where some forms of market and private ownership should be encouraged on the grounds of efficiency, innovation and democracy.

As I argued in my book, there are three basic flaws with a universal state owned system of economic planning. First, it is logistically impossible to match the market's ability to identify individual needs in mass consumer sectors. Former professor of Soviet studies, Alex Nove, once calculated that state bureaucrats in the Soviet economy faced the impossible task of planning for 12 million products, before even thinking about the individual needs of consumers in a country of over 200m.

A second and related obstacle to economic planning is the knowledge problem. How can state planners possibly have all the necessary knowledge in a complex economy to make effective decisions? Much important knowledge through which economies function is of the local and tacit variety – decentralised through billions of relationships existing between producers and consumers, local managers and employees and workers themselves. Such critical information and more

importantly, the knowledge of what to do with that information, is impossible to centralise.

But the most compelling point is that economies are not static; they are evolutionary and dynamic and, therefore, processes of economic development and knowledge production are ever changing and unpredictable. Central state bureaucrats or even global corporate executives can never be omnipotent. Sadly, these efficiency problems are actually multiplied if autocratic and hierarchical systems of planning are replaced by more genuinely democratic socialist ones. The need to reach agreement on every decision on a democratic and planned basis slows down the wheels of an economic system even further in a dynamic, open and uncertain economic environment, which is why socialist regimes that start off with the best of intentions often end up as totalitarian nightmares.

A functioning, democratic socialist economy in the future will have to be a mixed economy of sorts if it is to evolve, thrive and sustain itself in a way that does not crush individuality and innovation. But how do we move from strong social democracy within capitalism to an economic system that is recognisably socialist? Is the question even worth posing from a practical point of view? And, what should be the core of an anti-capitalist economics that Cat Boyd and others desire?

Given what I have said, we need to disconnect the market institution and even some forms of private ownership from capitalist logics. The more thoughtful progressive economists and market socialists such as Theodore Burczak recognise the usefulness of markets for certain functions in an economy, particularly in identifying consumer wants and needs. For example, we'd presumably want to encourage well-functioning, regulated farmers' markets while constraining or

abolishing more speculative financial and commodity markets that add to global economic instability.

There is also an important discussion to be had about what role competition would have in a socialist society but that is too big a subject to do justice here. Suffice to say that in terms of labour markets, wages can be taken out of competition through collective bargaining, national agreements, minimum wage legislation and so on, but in a global economy there is always the threat of low wage competition elsewhere. This is why the EU and international agreements, for all their current failings, are unavoidable in the creation of any kind of more progressive international economy.

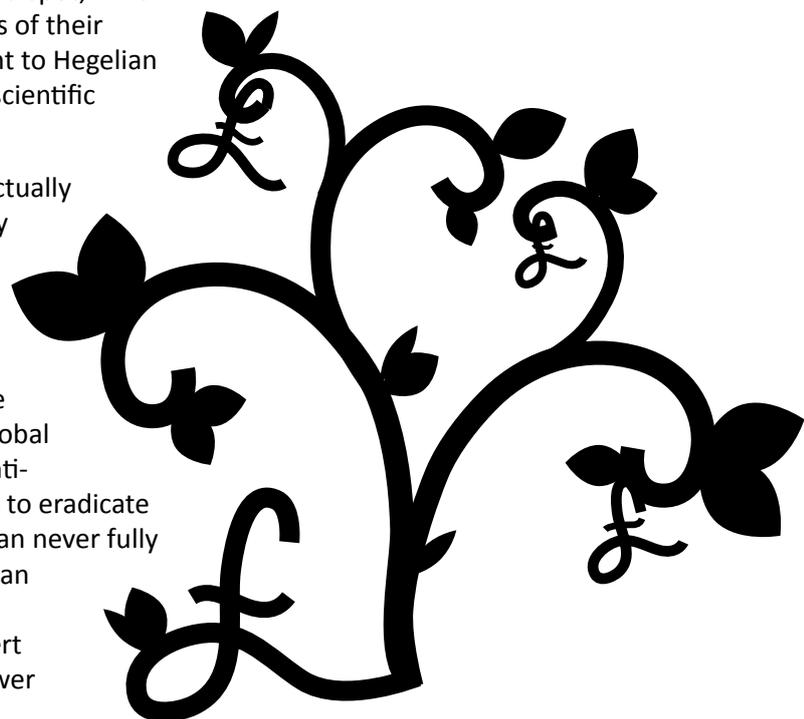
Many problems socialists have with economics are ultimately due to their philosophical underpinnings. While I think utopian visions are important, particularly in setting what American sociologist, Erik Olin Wright, refers to as the 'socialist compass', we need to disabuse ourselves of the kind of millenarian thinking where all politics disappears because the basic disagreements and conflicts over economic resources have been forever resolved. This was Marx and Engel's most serious blind spot, which reflects the limits of their own commitment to Hegelian philosophy and scientific rationality.

Instead, in the actually existing economy of 2016, we should pose the question: what are the worst evils of the contemporary global economy that anti-capitalism wants to eradicate (accepting one can never fully remove the human impulse for one group to try assert its economic power

over another)? When the question is put in this way, it becomes obvious, boiling down to two things: the need to challenge the private appropriation of wealth and diminishing conditions of labour.

The appropriate question then becomes what kind of economic institutions are needed to deal with these issues? A citizen's income is a critical element to the latter – set at a level that allows individuals the positive freedom to choose how they sell their labour. Freedom from economic servitude was always one of Marx's most important demands. And democratic forms of public ownership are one important way to deal with the increasing capture of common wealth by elites. But we will still need to encourage the right kinds of markets, innovation, entrepreneurialism and even competition, albeit with very different forms of social regulation and economic institutions than currently on offer.

Andrew Cumbers is Professor of Regional Political Economy at the University of Glasgow



Exit stage left

Vince Mills puts the socialist case for leaving

Support for the EU as potentially progressive, as Yanis Varoufakis believes, or a bastion of European peace as Jurgen Habermas thinks, ignores some uncomfortable and ugly historical facts. It's difficult to see the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) agreed in 1951 by France, Germany, Italy, Belgium, Luxembourg and the Netherlands, the predecessor to the EU, as anything other than an instrument for capitalist development at the expense of labour. As for peace and stability, what are we to make of the death and destruction that followed Yugoslavia's disintegration when Germany ensured the dissolution of the former republic by recognising Slovenia and Croatia on the grounds that they fulfilled 'the conditions set by the European Community'.

Defenders of the EU say 'Ah but what about the advances that 'Social Europe' has given us – works councils, sex equality, health and safety laws, the working time directive' and a range of other benefits included in the Social Chapter. This argument is all the more powerful when it is contrasted to the aggressive market-led approach of Thatcher and Major of that period. The Chapter proposed, for example, better rights for pregnant women than Britain; it also proposed a 48-hour maximum working week and a plan to give part-time and temporary staff who worked at least eight hours a week, the same employment rights, social security and contractual benefits as full-time workers and more. Unsurprisingly, it was opposed by Thatcher and Major, and Britain negotiated an opt-out.

Even though key areas in class struggle like pay, the right of association, the right to strike and the right to impose lock-out, were not included, many trade unionists, socialists and social democrats felt it

offered a set of tangible benefits as opposed to the anti-union measures of the Tories. Many still do. But they ignore something very important. This was a temporary concession by capital at a specific time and for specific reasons.

Jacques Delors, then European Commission president, recognised that increased labour movement resistance to worsening economic conditions could de-rail the EU project. The Chapter defused that and struck a blow for 'Rhine capitalism' of strong competition and social protection, which has recently won the affections of Nicola Sturgeon.

In 1997, Blair cancelled the opt-out, while simultaneously promising the Chapter would not be allowed to undermine competitiveness. Indeed, throughout the 1990s and 2000s, it was EU business as usual as we have seen endless pro-business directives on ending public ownership of basic utilities, ending state aid for industry, introducing compulsory competitive tendering in public services, ending local government direct labour schemes, and allowing companies to pay workers from other states at rates lower than the locally agreed rates.

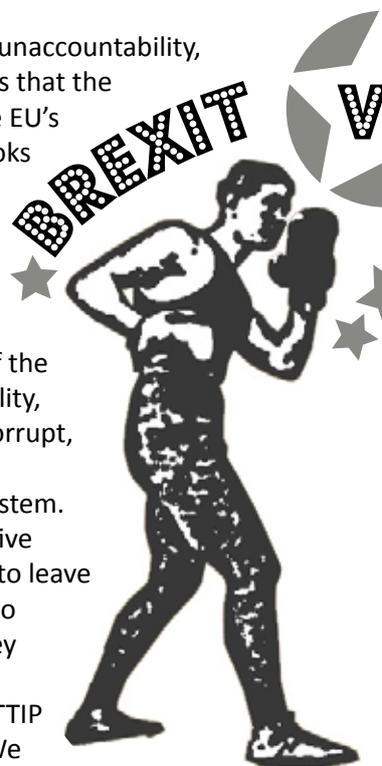
This attack on the social element of social democracy was extended to the democratic element following the 2008 crisis. The Troika inflicted the Excess Deficit Programme on Ireland leading to mass unemployment and cuts in wages, pensions, and of course public expenditure. The savagery here was matched and exceeded by the pain suffered by Greece. The deflationary Treaty for Stability Coordination and Governance ratified in 2013 will further crush public spending.

So can we reform the EU? That is what former Greek finance minister,

Yanis Varoufakis, is trying to achieve in his new 'Democracy in Europe' movement: 'we need a movement that rises up throughout in Europe, at once, with the same agenda everywhere to re-politicize political decisions and to democratize the decision making process'. But with an unelected bureaucracy at its core (the EU Commission) and a largely decorative parliament, a realistic strategy for reform beyond Varoufakis's spontaneous rising has yet to be laid out convincingly.

The level of unaccountability, which means that the last time the EU's financial books were signed off by auditors was 1994, is a clear indication of the impenetrability, not to say corrupt, nature of its operating system. The alternative approach is to leave the EU and to safeguard key services like health that TTIP threatens. We can then work with whatever progressive European countries are prepared to begin the global task of shifting the balance of wealth and power in favour of the people of Europe and away from its capitalist elites.

Vince Mills is secretary of Scottish Left Leave. Membership is open to all union and left individuals wishing to campaign to leave the EU.



The socialist case against leaving

Hugh Cullen says even with a socialist leave campaign, it will be populist xenophobia, nationalism and heightened neo-liberalism that will win the day if we leave

A left-wing exit is supported by some prominent socialists. We all want to leave an undemocratic, capitalist institution that puts big business interests before workers. But is a socialist paradise, where we are free to nationalise and go after tax dodgers, on offer? Our European sister socialist parties call for a 'united European left' to support a continent-wide challenge to capitalism and austerity, and to fight to democratise from within. We

must consider the terms of Brexit for the neoliberal forces in favour of leaving would still be present, if not

strengthened. Simplifying this into 'central capitalist rule (in) vs anti-neoliberalism and self-determination (out)' plays into the hands of bourgeois forces who want us to leave to make it easier to cut our public services

and close borders to immigrants and refugees.

The weakness of the EU's directly elected parliament means that EU power is state-centric. It is national governments who appoint the members of the powerful EU commission. Almost every national government has been run by neo-liberal parties, appointing neo-liberals to key positions. Change will have to come from domestic regime changes. Leaving would consign us to trying to seize state power and disable us from exerting left support across the EU.

With Europeans disenfranchised by centrist parties, the choice is of progressive left or reactionary right parties. The fight to democratize has taken leaps forward with Syriza in Greece and Communists in Portugal to name a few. In Britain, we have a reactionary right much stronger than a progressive left so an independent Britain is not on the brink of the radical changes seen elsewhere. Moreover, as Greece tragically showed 'socialism in one country' is impossible under globalized capitalism.

There would undoubtedly be a case for leaving if Brussels was blocking domestic and democratically implemented socialist legislation. However, the 'out' campaigns are organized and funded by right-wingers who want Britain to leave because being a part of the EU impedes their desire for a Britain with open borders for private capital but not for movement of people.

In an independent Britain, the neo-liberalism that provides the main reasons for leaving will still remain, possibly becoming even worse. Trade deals like TTIP and privatization would be passed by a right-wing British government far more easily as a Tory dominated Britain will not step back from globalized or 'Europeanized' markets. Furthermore, Britain may choose to undercut EU labour and environmental legislation in order to compete in a race to the bottom to attract investment. Britain would find itself at the mercy of international business over which it would have little control while alienating ourselves from the decision-making in Brussels, the outcomes of which we will still have to adhere to in order to trade with the EU as Norway and Switzerland do. The protection from

the EU parliament is limited, but it's better for workers than Cameron negotiating trade deals on his own.

We must also consider the future of the struggle for Scottish Independence. Although it would be wrong to choose a side in this debate because of our desire for independence, there are scenarios where the predicted strong Scottish vote to remain will keep Britain in the EU or be outweighed by overwhelming votes to leave from the rest of Britain. Both provide a mandate for a second indyref, with EU membership at its heart. Socialists who have campaigned to leave the EU cannot support Scottish independence in this situation.

So the pragmatic argument is that leaving the EU in the upcoming UKIP/Tory referendum will not advance the socialist struggle in Britain. We will still be at the mercy of free market economics as Britain engages in a race to the bottom with the EU. Change in Europe must come from the nation state level. Exiting the EU will leave us with the same challenges as before but it could also inhibit our ability to support the current campaign of the European Left to democratize it.

While rightfully acknowledging that the EU is a capitalist institution, if we do decide to leave the EU then it must be on our terms with a socialist government at the helm. That mandate must come from progressive ideas and a class-consciousness forming public opinion, not the current xenophobic and nationalistic narrative that is being driven.

Hugh Cullen is a fourth year student at the University of Stirling and a member of the SSP



iRobot more important than iScotland?

Jim Sillars says the big questions are not even being asked, let alone answered, in Scotland

Nothing is certain in politics. I am not as sure as others that when votes are counted on 5 May, it will all pan out as the opinion polls indicate at present – SNP majority, Tory vote up, and the rest also rans.

The political scene right now is dreich. Debate, if such elevated description can be given to what takes place at Holyrood, is standard fare. Labour says A&E waiting time targets are not being met, and the SNP replies that the NHS has never had so much spent upon it. No one asks why arbitrary chosen times are the way to judge the qualitative value of medical care. Education is failing say the opposition, no it isn't says the SNP.

It has become a boring predictable dingdong that adds nothing to public knowledge of the complexities of rationing health care (which is the way we do it here, rather than ration by money as in the US), or how to really remove the affliction of poverty on one in four of our children. And Nicola Sturgeon sails on supreme, exuding an air of confidence and control.

Is that SNP confidence justified? Certainly the SNP in Holyrood has mastered the art of managerialism, with John Swinney the outstanding example - he is like a 1950s bank manager cautiously turning the pages of a small business's accounts before deciding whether to lend £100. Well conducted managerialism requires administrative competence, mastering of the civil service brief, and on that score SNP Ministers do well.

But where over the last five years has there been the dynamism or imagination to set parts of Scotland on fire with new possibilities, lifting the depression that lies upon so

many with ideas that will truly lift them on to a new level of life?

The major SNP document of the last five years was the independence White Paper in 2014. Many have forgotten that Alex Salmond said it would be as eloquently written as the Declaration of Arbroath. It did not sparkle – it was the essence of managerialism, punting change-no-change, a political dumpling.

The SNP dominance is due, I suggest, less to an outstanding radical record but more to the abysmal performance by Labour, a body still not able to grasp that its adherence to Unionism in 2014 was atomic-style self-destruction. Watching Labour now is like gazing at a big rainfall in the desert (it does happen) disappearing, as if it had never existed.

With but a few weeks to run until May, it is difficult to imagine a Labour revival. Until it resolves its identity crisis, whether it is an independent political body or a branch of the UK unionist Labour party, which cannot help decry Scotland's potential, I cannot see any recovery. It isn't about nomenclature, but the implications of it. An independent Scottish Labour Party will think and act for itself, and that will open up areas of policy and ideas about independence that are not possible

if you are in lock-step with big brother in the south.

But enough of the present. It is the future of society that worries me. A future that is coming down the technology track at gathering speed, seemingly unnoticed by our political class whether they be of the left, right or centre. Academics have written books about it, columnists have drawn attention to it and Bill Gates has called for debate about it. A few months ago four experts gave a seminar about it in Downing Street. The Chief Economist of the Bank of England gave a speech to the TUC about it, warning of 11m jobs disappearing in Britain. Yet it does not figure in political debate. I refer to the phenomenal advances in Artificial Intelligence, the robot community.

As one expert author has written, what do we do when the signs go up 'no humans required'? Who will control the robots, who will own the wealth they produce, how will that wealth be distributed and gross inequalities avoided? Has 21st century democratic socialism any answers? This is a more important issue for the socialist movement than any that will present itself to us on 5 May.

Jim Sillars is a former Labour and SNP, MP as well as a former official at the STUC.



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Left on the cutting room floor?

Dave Watson says it's not anti-austerity to shunt Tory cuts onto councils as we could mitigate them by using our new tax powers

No one disputes that the root cause of austerity comes from the British government. The Tory austerity programme means that by 2020 public service spending in Scotland will have been cut by a massive 12.5% in real terms since 2010. These cuts are unnecessary and pursued as an ideological attack on public services.

In response, the Scottish Government has decided to slash council grant allocations to meet most of these cuts. Local authorities have been forced into a financial settlement, including the 9th successive year of the regressive council tax freeze. Any council that mitigated austerity locally by raising the Council Tax would lose not only the Council Tax freeze support but all the ring fenced grants. Local democracy is trampled into the dust.

This year's budget is taking 5.2% or £500m in real terms (£350m in cash) out of local government. Unavoidable commitments, such as employer National Insurance contribution increases, could double these cuts. As well as direct reductions to services, this could mean another 15,000 job cuts for local councils. Of the 50,000 jobs that have already been lost in devolved public services, 40,000 have been in councils. Even Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (CoSLA) has described the financial settlement for local government as 'undeliverable without an unacceptable level of cuts to services and staffing'.

The one positive element from the budget discussions is an allocation from the £250m identified for social care to pay the Scottish Living Wage to care workers. There still needs

to be clarity over how this money is allocated, but this could make a significant contribution towards the staffing crisis in Scotland's social care provision.

The problem with an austerity budget is that unless you expand the spending envelope, the debate simply deteriorates into robbing Peter to pay Paul as the First Minister has fairly pointed out. The departing CoSLA chief executive, Rory Mair, hit the nail on the head in his parting interview in the *Sunday Herald*, saying:

Scotland and local government have the power to raise more tax. So why are we keeping tax the same and making public service cuts? That's the very definition of an austerity budget. If you self-deny the ability to raise more money and you decide that the way to deal with a downturn in resources is to cut, however you dress it up, that's an austerity budget.

Under existing powers, Scotland has limited opportunities to grow the spending envelope as an alternative to austerity. That changes this year when the Scottish Parliament takes control over 10p of income tax, known as the Scottish Rate of Income Tax (SRIT).

UNISON has argued that the Calman powers are flawed because they don't allow Parliament to vary the

income tax bands or the rates within the bands. However, that doesn't mean they are not progressive - as the IPPR, Resolution Foundation and other academics have confirmed. And these flaws will in any case be corrected next year under the new Scotland Bill.

In the context of a general political reluctance to test public opinion on tax increases, Scottish Labour's proposed 1p increase in the SRIT is, if nothing else, bold. This would raise an additional £475m next year, rising to £520m in 2018-19. Scottish Labour is proposing a £100 rebate

for taxpayers earning less than £20,000 which will reduce this revenue gain by £50m but ensures that the lowest paid pay nothing more - including the average council worker in Scotland. The Scottish Parliament Information Centre (SPICe) has confirmed that 64% of

the increase would be paid for by the richest 20% of households.

Politically, this creates a challenge for the Scottish Government's anti-austerity rhetoric and reminds us that deficits can be reduced through taxation, as well as by cuts. 'Scandamerica' has never been a credible concept for me however much we would like to believe it was possible. Increasing SRIT doesn't mean an end to austerity in Scotland but it will raise enough revenue to save thousands of jobs and protect vital local services. It has also sparked a long overdue debate in Scotland about taxation and public services.

Dave Watson is the Head of Policy and Public Affairs at UNISON Scotland



Proportional representation – the idea whose time has come

Lynn Henderson argues the left must support PR if it is to gain political influence

Everyone is talking about democracy, or the lack of it, in the Brexit/Bremain debate. The focus on democratic transparency and representation in the EU often overlooks the unfair anomaly closer to home that is the Westminster electoral system of First-Past-the-Post (FPTP).

My union, the Public and Commercial Services (PCS) union sees proportional representation (PR) as a means of participation and presentation to counter neo-liberal austerity at all levels. Across Europe, PR has given space for people opposed to austerity to gain fair political representation whereas FPTP has not. Greece, Spain and Portugal have seen progressive alliances that better reflect this strand of political opinion.

Forms of PR are now utilised in Scottish local government, Scottish Parliament (and the other devolved legislatures) and European Parliament elections. Westminster, clinging to its unfair, outmoded and time-served FPTP system has now become the anomaly, not the norm.

The 2015 general election result shows FPTP is no longer fit for purpose. In Scotland, Labour won 24% of the vote yet returned only one MP. Even the phenomenal swing to SNP cannot account for it taking 56 of the 59 seats. Can even the most hardened SNP supporter really say it's a fair reflection of Scottish political views that Labour, LibDems and the Tories have only one Scottish MP each?

Across Britain, the Tories' vote share increased by just 0.8% but they got 24 more MPs. Labour increase by

1.5% but lost 26 seats. The Greens polled more than a 1m votes but got only one MP.

Electoral reform and PR in particular has unfairly been depicted on the left as a preoccupation of middle-class liberals. Traditionally, the labour movement has supported FPTP as politics swung back and forward in a clean-cut 'them and us' class war. Since the arrival of 'new Labour', alternating Tory and Labour governments have increasingly blurred, sometimes making it difficult to tell the difference between a Tory, LibDem or Labour policy in a scramble to appeal to swing voters and the fiction of 'middle-England'.



Corbyn's momentum of young activists joining the newly invigorated 'yes' generation in Scotland, provides an opportunity not only to reflect on a different kind of politics but to genuinely make it possible. 'New' Labour's abandonment of working class values and support can only now be won back by the Corbyn left leadership making a marked change, in England and Wales at least. But the Labour leader will also need a changed electoral system to embed this.

Some express trepidation that PR gives UKIP opportunities. It is worrying that support for the far right has increased amongst working class communities but this is a response to austerity, whipped up by government policies of 'new' Labour,

LibDem and Tory governments that scapegoated the poor, benefit recipients, immigrants and those fleeing wars seeking asylum. We will only defeat the politics of the far right by challenging them politically. Sweeping the problem under the carpet by maintaining a skewed, failing FPTP system also sweeps away significant representation for Labour, Green and other progressive parties and ideas.

PCS has favoured PR since our annual delegate conference of 2008. At the 2015 TUC congress, it successfully won PR for Westminster becoming TUC policy. The late general secretary of RMT union, Bob Crow, was a keen supporter of PR. So too is the Communication

Workers Union (affiliated to Labour) and Shadow Chancellor, John McDonnell, demonstrating a growing confidence on the left that not only is PR fairer, it is tactically good for the left to advance.

PCS is not affiliated to any political party. Our PR policy seeks to make politicians more responsive to our campaigning in elections where every vote counts. In the run up to the Scottish Parliament elections, our union through our 'Make Your Vote Count' campaign encourages each and every member to engage with, question and scrutinise candidates around core PCS questions on jobs, on pay and conditions, on tax and on welfare.

PCS is now bringing the debate on PR to the Scottish TUC congress in Dundee in April in the form of a motion that we hope will receive the support of Scottish affiliates.

Lynn Henderson is the national officer for Scotland and Ireland for the PCS union

Feminism for the future

To commemorate International Women's Day, Mary Lockhart outlines a feminist manifesto for the left parties

Trident: Feminists have been in the vanguard of campaigning against nuclear weapons, with many of the same moral, economic and security arguments as those advanced by the rest of the left. The argument more specific to feminism, however, is about the role of nuclear weapons in perpetuating and enforcing an institutionally unequal world order dominated by militaristic male power, of which such weapons are both symbol and projection.

Defence unions have resisted real debate within the labour movement on opposition to Trident because of the well paid, highly skilled jobs it sustains in construction, steel, heavy engineering and transport infrastructure. Light engineering design and manufacturing jobs involved in guidance systems are seldom highlighted, and yet hundreds of highly skilled women electronic engineers in Scotland earn their livings in that part of the defence sector (albeit typically on lower wages than their male colleagues). Power to decide on renewing Trident, like the UK's wider Defence and Security Strategy, lies with Westminster but parties of the left in Scotland could have a significant influence on that decision, including on revoking it if it is made, as seems likely, in favour of Trident renewal.

The manifestos for 2016 would make a start on this by going beyond expressing opposition and rehearsing the moral, political, and economic arguments. Each manifesto should contain a commitment to establish a broadly based and gender balanced Industrial, Manufacturing, Research and Development Commission, to consult widely on a time frame to produce a fully costed integrated strategy, one part of which would identify how to replace in every affected community every job, skilled, semi-skilled, and unskilled which might be lost by a decision to abandon the renewal of Trident. Part of its remit would be to consider at every stage how manufacturing could be developed and shaped so women have equal opportunity, equal recognition, and be rewarded

for their work and contribution, both social and economic.

Austerity and Welfare: Feminism is not about men, or even about women. It is, like socialism, about society. It is about structural transformation and radical change. Austerity is entirely and unreservedly about protecting, reinforcing, and perpetuating a status quo whose globally powerful elite will always be mostly white, mostly male, and entirely devoted to unfettered capitalism.

Women are disproportionately affected by austerity measures and welfare cuts. According to Engender, between 2010 and 2014, 85% of the £26bn worth of cuts announced by the UK coalition government came from women's incomes. This is because of systemic issues that see women twice as dependent on social security as men. Women are twice as likely to give up paid work in order to become unpaid carers, 92% of lone parents are women, the pay gap persists at 32% for women's part-time work, and women's economic independence is undermined by endemic domestic abuse.

The Scottish Government is to have new powers over welfare, but it is not yet clear what will be the extent of these powers - whether, for instance, in addition to the power to 'top-up' some benefits, the Scottish Government will have powers to determine matters such as entitlements, deductions, sanctions, and incentives. The UK Government has made it abundantly clear that any 'top-ups' to benefits in Scotland must be funded via the income tax raised in Scotland and retained by the Scottish Government. The party manifestos must beware of promising increases they cannot deliver. The Scottish Government will certainly not have sufficient powers to devise and implement a decent welfare state (rooted not in safety nets and mitigatory benefits but social and community security).

Accepting this, there are nevertheless changes which can be made. Access to comfortable housing with security

of tenure, good service provision, and supportive infrastructure is perhaps the element of social policy most important to women's welfare. Mitigating the bedroom tax has been expensive for Scottish Government and local authorities alike. All parties should pledge to scrap it altogether. This should apply also to benefits paid in respect of Council Tax remission in respect of number of rooms.

More than 50% of Scotland's rented housing falls below standards required. Rents, not benefits, should be capped, with landlords required to put a portion of rents they collect into a special 'Building Society' for maintenance and repair. Left parties should commit to a programme of building, acquiring and renovating houses for affordable rent in public ownership - whether by councils, housing associations or tenant co-operatives and including acquiring at market value former council, and other houses and flats which would otherwise be privately rented.

Unpaid carers: More than 60% of unpaid carers who have had to take a break from work to care for someone else are women, saving the Scottish economy £10.8bn a year. Their Carers' Allowance - if they claim it - is taxable, topped up to the level of Job Seekers' Allowance by income support, and they have no other statutory benefit or entitlement. Manifestos should promise to begin to work towards a living wage for unpaid carers, but in the meantime to raise the allowance to the level of the average weekly payment for a foster parent - around £165 per week, tax free.

Women without recourse to public funds: Left parties should commit to ensuring sufficient access to public services and funds to ensure no woman experiencing domestic abuse, and no woman trafficked into the UK for exploitation of any kind, should be unable to access sufficient support to allow her to access the accommodation and services she needs. All parties should sign up to a

summit including unions, third sector, local authorities, campaign and policy groups and parliamentarians to launch a review to make more fair and effective the benefits system in Scotland and maximise the new powers.

Human rights: Whatever the outcome of Tory plans to repeal Labour's Human Rights Act to ensure the European Court of Human Rights is no longer binding over the UK Supreme Court and it is no longer able to order a change in UK law, becoming an advisory body only, all left parties should promote manifesto pledges to oppose all such moves, and to review and amend all Scottish legislation to ensure human rights, including the rights of women, are incorporated in every aspect of their design and implementation.

Trade Union Bill: It is a vicious attack on workers' rights and profoundly sexist. Unions have for decades fought for women's rights – for equal pay and equality of opportunity, against discrimination and harassment. The Bill will severely impede these. Austerity measures

affect women more than any other group, whether those who use them or deliver. Outsourcing has already made it difficult for unions to recruit and organise women workers. The Bill will make it increasingly difficult even in the public sector for women to join and be represented by unions.

All left parties should pledge to support opposition to the Bill in the UK Parliament, and in Scotland that they would seek to find ways of blocking the implementation of the bill via existing constitutional or new Scottish Legislation, pending which they would support the Scottish Government – and local Authorities – to refuse to cap the facility time agreed with unions, and to continue to offer to its employees the facility of deducting union dues at source.

Taxation: More than 50% of Scots earn less than £25,000pa. Only 15% earn more than £45,000pa. Less than 1% (around 1700 individuals) earn more than £150,000pa. There are 150,000 people on housing waiting lists in Scotland. Over 120,000 have used a Food Bank in the past year. Left parties should

pledge to use the new powers over income tax to reverse Cameron's new higher rate thresholds, and to review income tax rates, bands and collection in Scotland over the next five years with a view to developing a more equitable and redistributive system of progressive taxation in accordance with needs. Scotland's left parties agree the Council Tax is discredited, and must be replaced. Tribalism which bedevils Scottish politics prevents them from reaching agreement as to how local government should be financed. The best manifesto commitment each of them could make, now that they have worked together on the Commission on Local Tax Reform, is to co-operate on ending it, and introducing a system which gives power, responsibility and democratic accountability back to local authorities and communities, and which combats austerity by reinvigorating the ability of councils to provide high quality services.

Mary Lockhart is a journalist, carer and political activist

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Adding the Irish tricolour to the Scottish saltire

Bill Bonnar says it is right that Scotland celebrates the Easter Rising

The recent proposal to fly the Irish Flag from council buildings to mark the 100th anniversary of the Easter Rising proved controversial with some, posing the question: what has this got to do with Scotland? In fact, whether it was the number of prominent Scots who took part in the rebellion, the links between Irish Republican organisations and Scottish radical movements or the impact of the Irish Republic upon Scotland, it has everything to do us.

A century ago at Easter, a decision was taken by Irish Republican forces to stage an uprising against British rule in Dublin and other key centres. It was felt as Britain was embroiled in the First World War (WW1), this would be an opportune time to strike. The decision was more political than military. With 20,000 British troops permanently based in Ireland, the chance of military victory was always going to be slim.

However, by striking such an audacious blow it was felt that this would start a general rising, bringing ultimate success. Those involved in the rising proved smaller in numbers than planned and after several days of intense fighting were crushed by overwhelmingly superior forces. Sixteen of the key leaders were brutally executed. Although it proved a military failure, the rising's political ramifications were profound. In November 1918, Sinn Fein won a landslide election victory securing 26 out of 32 seats on a platform of support for the rising and the Declaration of Independence proclaimed that day.

Britain refused to recognise the result and intensified its brutal occupation before being finally forced to concede limited independence by a widespread and popular campaign of military resistance by Republican forces. This led to the creation of the Free State after a brief and tragic civil war.

The role played by Scots was significant - the obvious example being James Connolly. While this is the 100th anniversary of the rising, we should also recognise it is the 100th anniversary of Connolly's death. Some of the others involved in the fighting came from Scotland. In fact, a Glasgow Battalion of Connolly's Citizens Army contributed volunteers. Many of the supplies to the Republican forces were smuggled to Ireland from Scotland and with around 20% of Scotland's population coming from direct Irish descent events were followed closely here.

While Scots played a key role in the rebellion, in the years that followed Irish republicans would come to play a major role in the development of the socialist movement in Scotland as it emerged after WW1. Many had fled into exile to escape British reprisals and the repression which followed from Free State forces, and many ended up in Scotland. An example was the formation of the Communist Party in Scotland as part of the CPGB in 1921. A glance at the names of the leadership elected at its first Scottish Congress would leave one in no doubt about the Irish connection.

A century on, how is the centenary being marked in Scotland?

Compared to the 50th anniversary in 1966, when it either wasn't marked or was greeted with carefully orchestrated hostility, the answer is remarkably well. A host of events have been organised looking at the Scottish connection and the impact of the Rising in Scotland. In Glasgow and the West, much will centre on the contributions of Irish Republicans who fought in the Rising including some of the women volunteers who are often neglected from official accounts. In Edinburgh, the focus will be on Connolly with a campaign to name a street after one of the great figures of the socialist movement in both Scotland and Ireland.

The anniversary also comes at an important time in Scottish politics. Without a doubt independence has become the central issue of Scottish politics around which all other issues revolve. A century ago, most on the British left did not support the rising because it was nationalist in nature. In Scotland, left opinion was more evenly divided with those such as John McLean supporting it for the same reasons they supported Scottish independence. It would mean the breakup of the imperialist British state and represent a key staging post on the road to socialism. Today, the overwhelming majority of the Scottish left supports independence and embraces the anniversary of the rising with great interest and enthusiasm.

Bill Bonnar is the National Secretary of the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP)

Contours of left-wing populism

Ewan Gibbs dissects the roots of recent radicalism

It's gone beyond cliché to state that in 2015 the European left experienced confirmation of the rise of a 'new kind of politics'. This was initially visible in Syriza's Greek general election victory, and confirmed through the rise of Corbyn and by Podemos' third place in the Spanish general election. The rise of Sanders suggests this phenomenon is not restricted to Europe. It's not enough to either indulge in jubilation or complain about obvious shortcomings.

It needs to be understood these developments have deep social roots; that some variety of 'the new politics' is here to stay, presenting severe problems and limitations, as well as a root of vaunted optimism for the left. A strategy must be formulated and popularised that can take the methods of mobilisation which achieved a mass base last year, and its language of social justice and fairness, into a potentially viable confrontation with capital and the state.

Populism classically revolves around the ability of charismatic leaders to wield power over diffuse social groupings who were otherwise incapable of organising themselves into a political force, and then using state power to offer them sufficient rewards to maintain a client base of support. We're far from a European variety of Peronism, but popular figures espousing appealing ideas that resonate with the common sense of a significant and disaffected layer of society have been a vital part of what made the recent left movements possible and important.

Rather than a traditionally understood populism, it's an emergent major subculture in increasingly polarised and fragmented societies that have sustained these movements. During 2010 and 2011 much was made of

'graduates without a future', not least by Paul Mason's despatches from Greece.

What appears to be maturing now is a section of urban-based, educated young people facing struggles in labour and housing markets with cultural values that could be loosely described as collectivist or social democratic. Crucially, they've a broadly favourable view of taxation, public sector and welfare state, and a commitment to the principle the economy should be shaped by state regulation with egalitarian social and political objectives.



To greater or lesser extents, this section is not completely atomised from the rest of society. Syriza and Podemos' ability to play to national historical traditions relating to partisan struggles and Spanish Republicanism, and Corbyn's huge election rallies demonstrated a political and social connection with the remainder of the politically active and conscious working class and labour movement organisations.

Given these developments, it seems clear that the ideas 'Corbyn is a flash in the pan' or 'Syriza won't last' are wrong-headed. These movements are manifestations with a manifest base and the product of world-historic social processes. Whether the specific formations that have already individually mobilised

hundreds of thousands of people last is, of course, important and consequential.

However, even if they crumble it seems unlikely that the brand of politics they have fostered will disappear. Whilst the demand for 'a new politics', 'social justice' or the Spanish Indignados cry of 'real democracy now' which inspired Podemos are aloof and abstract, there are concrete realities behind them. In particular, a complete rejection of the existing political institutions and an explicit linking of the unaccountable workings of big business and finance with them are present.

In comparative historical terms, this leaves us in the startling position that, in their political form, Corbyn's 'new kind of politics' is far less based on seizing the levers of the British state than old fashioned 'Labourism', even in its Bennite variety. Yet its economic demands are profusely more moderate than Militant's infamous call to 'nationalise the 200 monopolies' or even the 1983 Labour manifesto's proposals for public ownership and taxation.

Whilst this is an indication of the setbacks endured in three decades which saw the erosion of the limits on the market and redistribution of wealth, it is also demonstrative of the emergent subculture's lack of a clearly identified social subject and projection beyond struggling to achieve a level of social and economic 'fairness' via a politics of 'authenticity'. At this point the emergent left-wing subculture doesn't have a replacement for the industrial working class which provided the hopes and means for social democratic and communist projects.

This is truer in some countries than others. In Barcelona and Madrid,

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it was left-wing coalition of social movement activists who organised in a variety of struggles including major campaigns against house repossessions that succeeded in the municipal elections. In Britain, Corbynism almost feels like the product of the dearth of either workplace or social movement mobilisation following the intense student and union activity of 2010-2011.

These different stages of development make it clear that while there are shared processes, there are distinct traditions and dynamics between each state. Lucio Magri and Wolfgang Streeck's arguments on the historical and contemporary need for a European solidarity that can respect varying national approaches are clearly validated.

But it also seems evident that a feedback process will be needed between the expressly political and emergent forms of social and workplace protest for serious, sustained advances to be made on any front. The biggest danger of the present situation, especially within the British context, is that despite much talk of social movements in the abstract the lack of obvious, concrete struggle has embellished large-scale illusions in the capacity of governmental, as opposed to state, power.

Despite the experience of the 2008 crisis and the banks essentially holding a gun to governments' heads, and the more recent events in the Eurozone, the essential belief that a left-wing government in itself would be enough to enact massive social transformation seems to have grown firmer. This is particularly pronounced in relation to the popularised conception of a 'basic income' which in theory could erode the power of capital to force us to work.

Acknowledging these difficulties

doesn't mean disregarding 'the new politics' by any stretch. Its hostility to the political *status quo* and setup, rather than just a disregard for predominant policies or parties, is particularly important in this respect. The language of 'the new politics' often reads more like the demands of nineteenth century Chartism or the French 'social republic' than twentieth century social democracy.



As with the case of these historical reference points, contemporary demands are for a political transformation of the economy which will fulfil predominant conceptions of fairness, rather than the forms of industrial organisations and more incremental change and use of the existing institutions that characterised the last century. This is a big opportunity to present a counter-hegemonic conception of how the economy should be reintegrated with society and ran according to democratic principles if it can be seized effectively.

Our challenge is to draw up a vision of creating new institutions that will act to oversee this transition effectively and establish that sort of oversight and control, integrating the democratic impulse behind 'the new politics' with a concrete variety of the 'social justice' it espouses. It's on this terrain that the subculture might be able to break out of being subaltern. The British general

election result still hasn't been fully processed given the excitement, organisation and fire-fighting we've had to do since. But the core point that suburban England didn't vote Labour because it was convinced Ed Miliband's modest proposals for wealth distribution and slightly higher taxes for the wealthy were a threat to their household's wellbeing and British economic and political stability needs to be registered.

The new circumstances open up a different scenario. Labour is now in the hands of a section of society and a leadership which reject the Tory economic arguments in their entirety. The challenge is to present a vision which extends beyond the subculture, and enthusing voters, especially workers, who don't share its cultural values, by presenting a vision of the economy and politics that captures their own frustrations about the aloofness of politics, and the travails that they and their family face at work and in finding a home.

This will only succeed in coordination with developing social movement and union mobilisation, demonstrating the exercise of power against capital and its allies in political power, and shattering illusions that they are unbeatable. Building the material forces and political consensus behind the vision 'the new politics' will be a project that potentially takes decades, but the recent developments have shown it's a struggle in which we are organising for the potentially possible.

Ewan Gibbs is a PhD researcher at Glasgow University studying the political-economy and social impact of deindustrialisation. He is a Labour, Unite Community and UCU activist

Peace in Colombia: complicated finale

Hasan Dodwell says while signing a peace agreement to end the civil war edges closer, there are still significant obstacles to overcome at the negotiating table and in Colombian society

Peace talks between Colombia's largest guerrilla group, the FARC, and the Colombian government were initiated in November 2012 after a decade in which such negotiation seemed all but impossible. Based in Havana, the talks advanced further than ever before and, in an historic meeting last year which saw the President and FARC leader, Rodrigo Londoño Echeverri, shake hands, a commitment was made to sign a final deal before the end of March 2016. Although this deadline is now appearing increasingly optimistic the peace process continues to advance.

The FARC, or Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, was formed as a peasant guerrilla force in the 1960s in response to deep rooted social inequality and an exclusive political system. Whilst it and the Colombian state have been engaged in battle, particularly in the mountainous countryside, for more than half a century, the war has also provided the platform for some of the worst human rights abuses in the world. The political left, trade unionists and human rights activists have been particularly targeted with the Colombian state heavily implicated, directly or indirectly through its collaboration with paramilitary forces.

The peace talks have seen numerous historic advances not just for Colombia, but also in the context of peace processes internationally. Agreements have been made regarding rural development, drugs, political participation and victims. As an indication of its complexity, the agreement on victims was signed in December after eighteen months of discussions – the same amount of

time as the other three combined.

The victims' agreement encompasses perhaps the most difficult hurdle to any peace process: how to guarantee their rights whilst also adopting a transitional form of justice for those involved in the war. This friction is inherent to peace negotiations but, whilst some human rights organisations have expressed their reservations, the deal signed has received widespread accolade for placing the victims at the centre of the agreement. More recently, the UN Security Council passed a resolution which gave a commitment to provide observers to oversee a future ceasefire – this was the first resolution of its kind.



Perhaps the most divisive issue still to be agreed concerns how to finalise the peace deal. Whilst the FARC have called for a constitutional convention to form part of the final implementation, the Colombian government has defended a simple, but potentially risky, referendum. This, along with an agreement on how to end armed hostilities, issues around prisoners, the paramilitaries and a revision of points of contention 'left in the freezer' for later discussion, are the issues which remain on the table to be discussed.

There are also other significant challenges. Political activists and human rights defenders continue to be targeted – more

than 65 trade unionists have been killed since the talks began and paramilitary networks are reportedly strengthening across the country. Also of significant concern is the anti-peace camp. Led by the former President Alvaro Uribe, it still enjoys significant influence and is able to promote widespread antipathy towards the talks. Any advance in Havana is presented as further submission to the guerrillas.

With such internal division, international support has been an important ingredient to the peace talks. Justice for Colombia (JfC), the British and Irish union campaign, has been building support for the process internationally. JfC has brought together a group of politicians from all sides of the conflict in Northern Ireland to share experiences with the negotiators in Havana. In addition it has encouraged engagement from politicians in the United States coordinating a letter of support signed by politicians from the US, Ireland and Britain and has hosted public events in the British and European Parliaments where representatives from both negotiating teams were able to speak for the first time on a joint panel about the advances in the talks.

Whilst an end to the armed conflict is closer than ever before, the work towards a final agreement, and its subsequent implementation, will be a long and complicated one. Though Colombian civil society organisations know that their work for peace will continue until long after the signing of a final deal, it is essential that international support replicates that commitment.

Hasan Dodwell is the Campaigns Officer at Justice for Colombia

The politics and practice of progress

Andres Arauz, Ecuador's Minister of Knowledge and Human Talent, was interviewed by Ben Studd from Friends of Ecuador.

Rafael Correa's government is one of the most popular in Latin America according to polls. What are the main factors behind this popularity?

The main factor in the popularity is associated with credibility. This is because for the first time in a very long time in Ecuador's history, what Rafael Correa promised during the campaign actually became a reality. Not just in the long term, but in a very short period of time. People take very high regard of the president's word and his word now has value. That's the main difference between him and the rest of the politicians.

What have been the main advances for working people in Ecuador in the last nine years?

We started with a country that had been fully immersed in neo-liberal policies and we have transformed a lot of that. In terms of working rights, a lot of the measures that exploited workers like outsourcing of labour was prohibited - that was a radical change. We had re-regulated labour markets profoundly. And, then in terms of the provision of social and public goods, there has been a tremendous transformation there in terms of access to basic education, higher education and health services. All of these are constitutional rights and they are free and fully accessible to the public.

Rafael Correa came to power on the brink of the world financial crisis, and yet up until the recent crash in oil prices Ecuador experienced very strong growth. How was this achieved?

The main element spurring growth in Ecuador has been public investment. In Latin America in general, specifically in Ecuador, public investment had been abandoned for about 30 years. So we have a lot to make up, and that's why the speed of public investment rates have been going up since Correa came into government, and in terms of building and rebuilding infrastructure, new hydro-electric power plants, and injecting money into the economy via a lot of social and welfare programs. Our growth is associated with the process of guaranteeing these constitutional rights. So public investment has been the main engine of growth, and we definitely intend to continue those policies and the growth of our public sector.

What has been the approach of the government in response to the challenges posed by low oil prices?

The situation is complex now because of the oil price but fortunately there have been ten years of successful transformative policies in our fiscal area, so Ecuador improved its tax collection rates. There was a lot of tax evasion before, now there is much less and that has allowed for us to continue government spending without significantly affecting the rest of the economy or people's rights. We have definitely prioritised maintaining the standard of living of the majority and while there have been a few adjustments they have been mostly focused on the rich. For example, we have eliminated a few subsidies used by big corporations like cheaper access to fossil fuel energy. Several other

measures similar to that have been taken to make adjustments but not allow those adjustments to affect the majority of the working population.

The last 15 years has seen massive social progress in Latin America, but this is now under threat with the resurgence of the right. How do you see Ecuador's role in defending social progress and democracy in Latin America?

Latin America is facing what we call a Conservative Restoration. We are definitely on alert because the forces of capital, and especially speculative and neoliberal financial capital, are very keen to have the progress that Latin America has shown the world be reversed because it has been an example for the rest of the world. This means that the main element we now have to take care of is maintaining unity within our social movements, organisations and left parties and to try to sustain the broad coalition we have managed within the last ten years as well as retain the connection with citizens. Citizens' rights and needs are evolving, and we have to make sure that Latin American progressive forces are still connected to society.

The civil war within Islam

Peter Lomas argues there are very different traditions within Islam

The Arab uprisings which began in Tunisia in late 2010 have collapsed almost everywhere into chaos and violence. Yet these were revolutionary events, reflecting the end of the Cold War and the dictatorships which the Cold War had sustained. The sociologist, Olivier Roy, described the peoples of North Africa and the Middle East as impatient with the corrupt institutions, from the military to the Muslim Brothers, through which Islam had been used to repress their democratic aspirations. They no longer obsessed, he said, about a pan-Arab nation opposed to Israel and the US. They simply wanted freedom (political, religious and intellectual) and the Internet, and their migrant compatriots in Europe had shown them a different life was possible.

I think that this analysis is correct, and that there is a civil war within Islam, between modernity and freedom on the one hand, and tradition and totalitarianism on the other. It is never a good idea to intervene in other people's civil wars. One side or other will seek to suck you in; rival interveners will appear; the war will grow more complicated and spread. The breakdown of two former-Soviet client states, Iraq and Syria, has led to a three-way conflict between Western, Russian and regional forces.

The democratic uprising against the Assad regime in Syria was hijacked - first by local Islamists, then by 'Al-Qaeda in Iraq'. The latter were former military and intelligence officers from Saddam's regime, cut loose after 2003 by the American dissolution

of the Iraqi establishment. This is the origin of Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)/Daesh. Since then, thousands of disaffected young people from Afghanistan, Central Asia and the Middle East have flocked to fight for a cause portrayed, deceptively, as a revival of the original Islamic project - a cause which runs counter to the modernising, pro-democracy uprisings which began in Tunisia and have been stifled elsewhere. Daesh would like nothing better than to turn the civil war within Islam into a world war.

This also explains the choice of France for the Daesh-inspired terrorist attacks of November 2015. Modern French political identity is determinedly republican and secular. It means pluralism in religion and politics, rejecting the domination of any strand of either. Rejecting, therefore, Islam; rejecting even the Catholic monarchism which was the antique core of the French state (which the Joan of Arc of the National Front, Marion Le Pen, has laid claim to). The results of the regional elections, a month after the terrorist attacks in Paris, reasserted this view: they supported French republican identity.

From this I draw two broad conclusions. One is that there is only trouble in British intervention in the Syrian - we should also say Iraqi - civil war. The other is that the French, republican, secular model of the state is the best way, in the long term, to limit - since it has already reached us - the effects on our society of the civil war within Islam. It is the success of peaceful, united, prosperous, free Europe - and France at the

heart of Europe - which has inspired the French-speaking young men and women of North Africa to rebel against their ossified regimes and seek, as Roy puts it, a post-Islamic future.

The orthodox Islamic position is unquestionably hegemonic. It is that Islam includes, revises and perfects the two preceding Abrahamic faiths - and as such, cannot itself be reformed or superseded. Whereas the unorthodox position, expressed in Islamic-heritage Tunisia and beyond, is - how to escape, or at least distance oneself from, a culture and an ideology which cannot be reformed.

Let me be quite clear: contra some assertions, there is no 'moderate' Islam. There are only moderate people, and a lively republican democracy is their natural home. I look forward to an independent republican Scotland, which breaks with the traditional institutions of the British state, like the monarchy and the anti-democratic House of Lords - indeed with any second 'revising chamber' which, second-guessing the people's political thoughts, stifles cultural and intellectual freedom. We will not escape the civil war within Islam, but we should be ready to talk to its refugees.

Peter Lomas is the author of Unnatural States: The International System and the Power to Change (Transaction Publishers, 2014).

People of the Caucasus and Central Asia – beware your new ‘conflict resolution specialist’

Dear friends

Late last year, a former British MP by the name of Jim Murphy flew into Tbilisi, Georgia in his new role as a ‘specialist in conflict resolution’ with the Finnish organisation, Crisis Management Initiative (CMI). He claims to be able to help the people of the Caucasus and Central Asia region with difficult conflicts such as those which have occurred over Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Here in Scotland, where he was Scottish Labour leader until May of last year, his new role is considered a very bad joke. Far from being a specialist in conflict resolution, Murphy is a failed politician with a terrible track record of generating division and argument.

During 2014’s referendum on Scottish independence, Murphy was the most confrontational campaigner for a ‘no’ vote. His abrasive style led to him becoming hugely unpopular among Scottish voters.

Despite the victory of the ‘no’ campaign, by 55% to 45%, Murphy’s personal unpopularity contributed to Scottish Labour’s astonishing collapse in the British general election in May 2015. Labour lost all but one of its 41 seats in Scotland, while the pro-independence Scottish National Party took 56 of the country’s 59 seats. Murphy himself lost his seat.

Voted out of parliament, forced to resign as Scottish Labour leader, Murphy is looking for employment. His reinvention of himself as a supposed expert in conflict resolution is based upon nothing other than a desire to resuscitate his declining career.

Murphy has no credentials in conflict resolution. In fact, as a leading member of Labour Friends of Israel, he has fanned the flames of conflict. In 2013, for example, he led a delegation to the illegally occupied Golan Heights. The Golan is Syrian territory which has been occupied by Israel, in contravention of international law, since 1967.

Nevertheless, Murphy and fellow pro-Israel Labour MPs went there with senior Israeli military figures for a ‘defence briefing’. That ‘briefing’ no doubt ignored the fact that Israel flouts international law by holding a huge, undisclosed nuclear arsenal in the Negev desert.

As a supporter of Britain’s nuclear arsenal, Murphy disagrees with both Labour leader, Jeremy Corbyn, and Scottish Labour which recently voted against the UK renewing its Trident nuclear weapons system. It is hardly surprising, then, that Murphy has done nothing to oppose Israel’s nuclear arsenal and nothing to support the brave Jewish whistle-blower, Mordechai Vanunu, who rots in an Israeli jail for exposing his country’s own weapons of mass destruction.

Given all this, it is difficult to see what kind of peace Murphy could possibly bring to the Caucasus and Central Asia. There is, however, something even more damning in Murphy’s political history. It is that as a disciple of Tony Blair, Murphy voted in parliament for the catastrophic invasion of Iraq in 2003. Despite more than a million people taking to the streets of London against the imminent war, Murphy advocated invasion on the spurious grounds that the Saddam Hussein regime had ‘weapons of mass destruction’.

Few people doubt that a vote against war in the British parliament would have, at the very least, made it much more difficult for US president, George W Bush, to invade Iraq. In the weeks before the invasion, opinion polls showed the majority of the British people against war, yet Murphy, a careerist politician who was currying favour with Blair and the Labour leadership, argued for and voted for the invasion.

The consequences, in terms of loss of innocent civilian lives, and in terms of the on-going catastrophe in Iraq, are clear for everyone to see. The consequence for Murphy was that he was given a succession of cabinet posts by Blair. Jim Murphy posing as a conflict resolution specialist is like the snake oil salesmen of old. He has nothing to offer. His only motivation is personal gain.

So, I warn the people of the Caucasus and Central Asia, do not allow Jim Murphy, Scotland’s most hated and failed politician, to seek a well-paid new career at your expense.

*Best wishes
Mark Brown*

Scottish journalist and political activist

Kick up the Tabloids

Elsewhere in this edition, you will have read a number of articles of the theme of Scotland on the cusp of big challenges. Writing this from Australia, while performing at the Adelaide Fringe, it would appear that the entire world is on the cusp.

While at home we may be concerned about our faltering economy, a potential Brexit after the EU referendum, and the possibility of that leading to a second independence referendum, over here Australians are concerned with their faltering economy, the uninspiring choices faced by them at their upcoming general election and potential global calamity that would ensue if the USA were to elect a President Trump.

Back in the UK, we had the sight of David Cameron coming back from Brussels, claiming to have cut 'the best deal for Britain' when all of Britain knows he's actually changed bugger all. In terms of meaningless deals, it's possibly the most meaningless since Neville Chamberlain came back from Germany in 1939, waving a piece of paper which promised 'peace in our time'. The only difference today is that Cameron's piece of paper promises endless war in the Conservative Party.

One of the worst-kept secrets in politics was finally broken when Boris Johnston came out on the side of the Brexit campaign, thus positioning himself to be the next party leader, and potentially the next Prime Minister. So instead of Stay v Leave, In v Out, or Yes v No, we have Boris v Dave.

How utterly ludicrous that Britain's future in Europe should be used to settle some old argument from the sixth-form common room at Eton! Or perhaps the bad blood between them goes back to their days at Oxford. Maybe Boris is still jealous that Dave got the first go at the pig's head.

As polls suggest most Scottish others appear to be pro-European, there

is no doubt that the big guns of the 'Leave' campaign will be sent up here to drum up support. The fact that Boris Johnston is the most acceptable of their number should be enough to convey how the rest constitute a parade of the utterly unacceptable. Expect to see Nigel Farage up here before May, if for no other reason than it gives him the opportunity to hide in a pub when chased down the street.

Worse still, we will doubtless be treated to repeated sightings of the odious, corpulent figure of UKIP's only elected representative in Scotland, Davis Coburn, a man whose opinions are even more disgusting than his appearance. The homophobic, anti-Scottish, virulently anti-European party of UKIP seems a strange home for a gay, Scottish member of the European Parliament. He must really hate himself.

On the other side of the coin, of course, there is the clear danger that Eddie Izzard will do another pre-referendum tour of Scotland. Another dose of his smug, patronising uttering would be enough to turn many pro-European Scots into voting to leave.

And, it cannot be denied that many Yes-voting, pro-European Scots are hoping that North of the Border we vote to stay, while the English vote to leave, thereby giving Nicola Sturgeon a golden opportunity to demand a second independence referendum.

While a tempting scenario to many of us, it could lead to a degree of voter fatigue, not to mention voter confusion. In a matter of a few years, we could have crammed in the independence referendum, a Westminster election, a Holyrood election, a European referendum, and another independence referendum.

As well as the confusion of 'What's it we're voting for this time?' and 'Are we voting for an MP, an MSP, a councillor, someone on a party list,

freedom from Britain, freedom from Europe?', it will be more confusing still for 16-18-year olds who could vote in the indyref but not in the European referendum, for Holyrood but not Westminster. There is the fear that some people might get a bit tired of the whole carry-on and not turn up.

Here in Australia, voting is compulsory. I'm not sure how they punish non-voters, maybe pack them off to Britain on a boat. This is far from ideal, however, as at the last election it gave the country Tony Abbott as its Prime Minister. If you are unfamiliar with the man, imagine Nigel Farage sober - which is a seriously scary picture. In time-honoured Aussie fashion, he was kicked out of the job by his own party as was his Labour predecessor, Julia Gillard.

Most Australians I talk to are pretty uninspired about the choices likely to be offered to them in their election, but in common with most Scots are appalled at the prospect of the US giving the world President Trump. All apart from one guy I talked to who said that he could understand why Americans might vote for Trump given his familiarity to the public, as they see him so frequently on TV. I did point out to him that Rolf Harris had been on television, but that few Australians would be inclined to vote for him. 'I don't, mate', he said 'I reckon he'd be better than Tony Abbott!'

A turbulent spring faces Scotland and Britain. Hopefully, we can all view it with a similar sense of humour.

Vladimir McTavish will be performing his solo show 'Scotland: 45 Events That Shaped a Nation' at Yes Bar, Glasgow on Sunday 27th March at 7.15pm as part of the Glasgow International Comedy Festival

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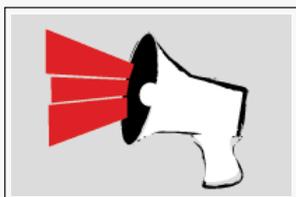
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