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radical feminist green

Perspectives

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ROOTS OF RENEWAL

REVISITING THE

SOCIALIST TRADITION

MAGAZINE OF SCOTLAND'S DEMOCRATIC LEFT

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CONVENER'S COLUMN

THINGS CAN ONLY GET BETTER?

British politics in recent times has been dominated by the personality and project of Tony Blair. Reflection on how Blair and Blairism arrived and developed are important. This is something that *Perspectives* will not neglect. For the moment however, the focus is on how we move beyond an approach that backs neo-liberal economics and illegal militarism but crassly uses the language of social justice.

Tony Blair's leadership of (New) Labour notionally placed him in a leading position in the Labour movement. Unsurprisingly, labour (working people) have long since rejected the idea that the prime minister is any kind of an ally. Tony has reciprocated with little love for the unions or the public sector. Blair's ideologically-driven attacks on the public sector have not met with universal enthusiasm. Above all else his capitulation to Bush's rush to war was a step too far.

Stating the obvious, that Blair is an obstacle to progress, is not enough. Assuming there is an old Labour Party to regain is not enough (even if it were desirable). Wishing that his abdication to Brown, if and when it comes, will simply change everything is not enough. And neither is the "revo-



Our radical traditions have been damaged by the ascendancy of Blair. New Labour connects to the experience of Thatcherism.

lutionary correctness" of waiting for spontaneous change to be led by the class.

Our radical traditions have been damaged by the ascendancy of Blair. New Labour connects to the experience of Thatcherism. It operates with a language that goes beyond traditional social democracy. It is a moral and managerial undertaking. Could there be Blairism after Blair? There could. But without Tony the distinction between New Labour and a re-invigorated Tory Party, or for that matter a Swinney-led Scottish National Party, could become even more blurred.

Central to the project, Brown appears to speak a different language. Despite himself his leadership could mark a change. But that's not the point. Only if an alternative politics that speaks to the changing nature of Britain's nations, regions and peoples develops will things improve. Alliances will need to be built at tactical and ideological levels.

Contributing to the construction and culture of that alternative politics is what *Perspectives* is about.

Stuart Fairweather
Convener, Democratic Left Scotland



Democratic Left Scotland

**Annual General Meeting
and discussion –**

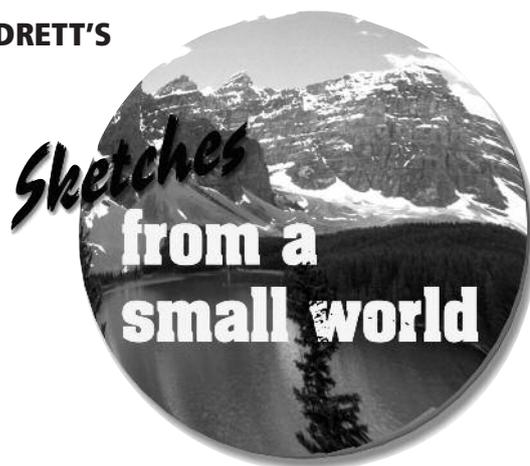
Revisiting the Socialist Tradition

Cowane Centre, Cowane Street, Stirling
11am, Saturday 24th April 2004





EURIG SCANDRETT'S



The activities this autumn of Friends of the Earth and Scottish Education and Action for Development brought two activists from Ecuador to meet with Scottish communities. One of these, Fidel Aguinda, is from the Cofan people in Ecuador's Amazonian region. 95% of the Cofans' territory has been taken from them by oil interests, particularly Texaco, and funded by European banks. Not only are they down to 5% of their territory, scattered in small settlements, but also the spiritual tradition which infuses their identity and self-belief is threatened. The spirit world, with which they communicate through their Shamans, lies in the ground and is damaged by the oil exploitation. Texaco's activities are sacrilegious desecration as well as ecological barbarism.

Ecological debt is becoming a significant issue in global relations. Ecological debt is the legacy of the damage caused to the ecologies of the global South – the poorest and formerly colonised countries – as a result of the developments in the North. It takes many forms: direct exploitation by Northern owned companies; biopiracy – the theft of biological material to produce crops or pharmaceuticals; overuse of the global life support systems by the rich countries.

If you calculate the price of the ecological damage caused to the South, the ecological debt exceeds the financial debt which is owed by these poorest countries. However, calculating a cost is not the issue – how do you fix a price on a species, a forest, a child's health, a spiritual resource for a community? The issue is the continuing exploitation and the urgent need for global redistribution of the fruits of this exploitation

A European network of ecological debt activists was formed at the European Social Forum in Paris in

Ecological debt is the legacy of the damage caused to the ecologies of the global South – the poorest and formerly colonised countries – as a result of the developments in the North.

November. Taking the lead from the Southern countries – the ecological creditor countries – the ecological debtors in the North are mobilising to repay what we owe by targeting the companies which continue to extract wealth and destroy the environments and culture in the rest of the world.

Next year there will be increasing opportunities for putting the ecological debt on the political stage. In January, the World Social Forum next year is taking place in Mumbai, the first time it has happened out-with Porto Alegre in Brazil. The next European Social Forum will be in London, and there are discussions about having a Scottish Social Forum. Looking a little further ahead, the G8 will be meeting in Gleneagles which will certainly be accompanied by international protests.

Meanwhile, Alastair Darling has announced commitment to expanding airports and rolled over to the predicted demand for increased air travel. This means more than doubling the current number of international flights, with only minor concessions to increased fuel efficiency and emissions reductions. Air travel is the most effective way to release carbon into the atmosphere and speed up climate disruption. Air travel will undoubtedly continue but Darling's refusal to attempt to manage demand is scandalous. And I remember when Alastair Darling would speak at the Socialist Environment Resources Association meetings in Edinburgh – one suspects that being leaned on by the powerful aviation industry is enough to forget those days of socialist environmentalism.

■ *Eurig Scandrett is an environmental activist and a member of Democratic Left Scotland's national council.*

REVISITING THE

Launching a major series of articles and discussions exploring the traditions that have shaped radical politics in Scotland, **David Purdy** examines whether socialism has been a prime casualty of developments in the twentieth century, and if anything of value can be salvaged that may help us address the political malaise of the new millennium.

ROOTS OF RENEWAL: LEARNING FROM OUR TRADITIONS

Democratic Left Scotland (DLS) is neither a political party nor a social movement, but a go-between and catalyst, seeking to facilitate civic and political renewal by bringing together various overlapping but distinct traditions of radical thought and action. Three of these – socialism, feminism and Green politics – appear in the DLS logo: a dancing circle of red, violet and green “jelly babies”. But other political traditions belong in the circle too: Scottish nationalism, social liberalism, radical Christianity and the network of movements concerned with peace, global justice and development.

In keeping with our aims and in partnership with others, DLS is proposing to organise a conference in the autumn of 2004 under the title *Revisiting the Socialist Tradition*. We envisage this as the first in a series of

similar events to be held over the next few years, with subsequent conferences focusing on the other traditions that have shaped radical politics in Scotland. In each case, participants will be invited, first, to assess the past achievements, failures, strengths and weaknesses of the tradition in question, and then to consider its relevance to the key problems we face today: US global hegemony and the crisis of international institutions; the pervasive sway of neo-liberal ideas and the relentless march of the market; and finally, the atrophy of democratic politics, the degenerate state of New Labour and the absence of any alternative political formation which combines inspiring values and vision with a credible strategy and programme.

We hope to publish the conference proceedings in a suitable format. Details of this and other matters can be decided in due course. For the moment, we are looking for expressions of interest and offers of help, from individuals as well as organisations, and to this end have invited a number of prospective partners to join a conference organising group.

The article that follows is intended to provoke reactions and stimulate thought about a political tradition which, with the collapse of communism and the retreat of social democracy, has been widely written off as a prime casualty of the twentieth century. Is the socialist tradition exhausted? Can anything of value be salvaged from the wreck of yesterday’s hopes and dreams?

SOCIALIST TRADITION

Socialism was the child of the two great upheavals that created the modern world: the democratic impulse unleashed by the French Revolution and the economic growth-machine set in motion by the industrial revolution. Of course, there were precursors: popular revolts against ruling elites, visions of a just and harmonious order and small-scale experiments in communal living. But these antecedents lacked two ingredients that marked out socialism as something new: the ideas of universalism and progress.

Socialists insisted that every member of society – conceived ultimately as a world-wide community embracing the whole of humankind – has a life to live and a contribution to make to the common good. Hence, the best kind of state is one which includes all adults as citizens and treats all citizens equally. And whereas pre-modern utopian thinkers imagined the ideal society as a fixed and final order, socialists believed in progress. The establishment of a socialist republic would inaugurate a continuous and cumulative process of social change, ending the degradation, misery and strife caused by exploitation and oppression, and harnessing the prodigious productive powers created by capitalism for the benefit of all.

The French Revolution left another lasting mark on the socialist tradition. For although it was a bourgeois revolution aimed at liberating the market from feudal restrictions and although the pursuit of liberty, equality and frater-



nity soon gave way to tyranny and war, the belief survived until late in the twentieth century that the revolution had not failed, but would some day recur because its business was unfinished. A purely political transfer of power was one thing – a social transformation quite another.

SOCIALISTS DIVIDED

From the outset, socialists were divided over questions of direction and strategy. Latter-day Jacobins saw insurrection as the royal road to power, while communitarians and co-operators sought to bypass the state and challenge the capitalist system from below by developing new modes of working and living that prefigured the socialist future. By the end of the nineteenth century, however, the dominant trend in the movement,

represented by the parties of the Second International, aimed at the conquest of state power as the essential pre-requisite for the socialist project, though classical Marxism, the body of doctrine to which these parties subscribed, never formulated a satisfactory theory of the relationship between capitalism and the state, especially under conditions of liberal democracy. Indeed, neither Marx nor Engels had any real experience of liberal democracy or of the great transformation the state underwent in the course of the twentieth century.

Even among socialists who agreed about the need to win state power, there were fierce disputes about how this was to be done. Kautsky championed the parliamentary road to socialism, but insisted that capitalism was incorrigibly crisis-prone and that a decisive break would be needed to move beyond it. Bernstein and the Fabians frankly advocated a strategy of gradual, piecemeal reform. Lenin denounced the idea of “democratic class struggle” and prescribed an uncompromising, vanguard-insurrectionist road to power. Rosa Luxemburg rejected parliamentary socialism, but was repelled by the authoritarian features of Bolshevism and sought an alternative in mass strikes and workers’ self-management. Eventually, under the pressure of the First World War and the Russian Revolution, what had hitherto been a unitary, if fractious movement split into two main divergent branches, one commit-

Though otherwise irreconcilable, social democracy and Soviet communism had one thing in common: both were party-centred and statist.

ROOTS OF RENEWAL – REVISITING THE SOCIALIST TRADITION

ted to electoral-legislative politics within the framework of liberal democracy, the other dedicated to defending the Soviet Union and building an international revolutionary movement.

PARTY-CENTRED AND STATIST

Though otherwise irreconcilable, social democracy and Soviet communism had one thing in common: both were party-centred and statist. Neither paid much attention to the problem of rooting the process of social transformation in the institutions, norms and practices of civil society. For communists, in particular, schooled in the discipline of class war, the party was the alpha and omega of politics. And there is surely no more brutal or bloody example of state power being used to crush resistance and force through change than Stalin's headlong and ruthless drive to collectivise agriculture, industrialise Russia and institute a centralised command economy. Trotsky and his followers rightly condemned this perversion of the socialist ideal, though they shared the basic mindset from which it sprang. Of the old Bolshevik leaders, only Bukharin, champion of the worker-peasant alliance and of a gradual, evolutionary way forward, offered a genuine alternative to Stalin, and he was removed from power in 1928 and executed ten years later.

ULTIMATE GOAL

Social democrats, for their part, had to reckon with the exigencies of electoral competition, and this posed problems of its own. Industrial workers, their core constituency, never formed a majority of the electorate in any country. Hence, social democrats faced a dilemma; they could remain a class party and suffer perpetual defeat, or they could become a "people's party" and dilute their commitment to socialism as an "ultimate goal". The dilemma was all the more acute in that the "ultimate goal" required not just a majority, but an overwhelming

Social democrats faced a dilemma; they could remain a class party and suffer perpetual defeat, or they could become a "people's party" and dilute their commitment to socialism as an "ultimate goal".

majority, for measures which are passionately opposed by powerful minorities can only be implemented with massive, multi-class support. Witness the disaster that overtook the Popular Unity government in Chile in 1973 or, conversely, the unparalleled success of Swedish social democracy in building the world's most advanced welfare state and in governing either alone or with allies for all but nine years since 1932.

Of course, there were other, lesser branches of the socialist tradition besides the big two. From time to time, in the course of a major social convulsion, spontaneous manifestations of local self-management would flare up, burning brightly, but briefly, before fading away. Thus, the workers' councils that emerged in several European countries immediately after the First World War were to re-emerge in Republican Spain during the Civil War and again, a generation later, in France when an explosion of student and working class revolt sparked off a wave of radical militancy and demands for autogestion throughout Western Europe, while in the East, the Prague Spring and the rise of Solidarnosc shook the system of bureaucratic centralism to its foundations.

EUROCOMMUNISM

In the sphere of party politics, the Eurocommunist movement in the 1970s attempted to forge a novel synthesis of communism and social democracy, elaborating themes first broached forty years earlier in their different ways by Gramsci, Bukharin and Hilferding. This was, however, very much a minority current and its impact in the countries where it evolved – mainly Italy, France and Spain – was limited. One telling indication is the fate of the Italian Communist Party (PCI), the most successful communist party in Western Europe and the most advanced proponent of Eurocommunist ideas and policies. The Democratici della Sinistra, the PCI's majority successor, has turned its back on the past and now looks to New Labour

for inspiration, while the Rifondazione Comunista, its minority heir, never approved of Eurocommunism anyway and continues to preach the old religion.

WHAT IS SOCIALISM ANYWAY?

In the light of this record, perhaps the most important question to be asked is what exactly we mean by socialism. No doubt, as always, people will have different views about what an ideal society or, at any rate, one very much better than the one we live in, might look like. But whatever stars we steer by, in a world of incessant change and uncertain prospects, where political options are constrained by structural bias, vested interest and cultural inertia, and where, to be effective, political actors must anticipate the moves and counter-moves of their opponents, values and visions should not be confused with strategies and programmes.

The idea of socialism as an eventual destination, a complete society entirely different in character from "capitalism", was tested to destruction in the twentieth century. The old Marxist idea that "socialism" and, beyond that, a still higher stage of social development called "communism" would emerge from the bowels of capitalism, just as capitalism evolved from feudalism, turned out to be wrong. There are two distinct, though related reasons why Marx and subsequent socialists got this wrong: one a gap in their political theory and practice; the other a flaw in their economic understanding.

POPULAR DEMOCRACY

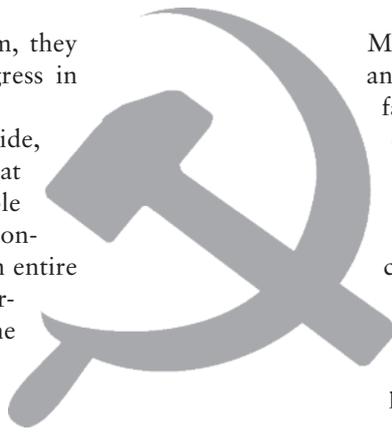
On the political side, although the discourse of Marxism contained a trenchant critique of both capitalism and liberalism, implying that both would somehow be transcended under socialism, neither the social democratic nor the Leninist variants of the socialist tradition ever made any serious, non-rhetorical attempt to promote an alternative and superior form of popular democracy, and although the council communist and Eurocommunist variants did at

least confront the problem, they did not make much progress in tackling it.

On the economic side, socialists failed to grasp that it is impossible in principle for the state to plan and control the development of an entire national economy, intertwined as it is with the diverse purposes and actions of millions of social agents. It makes no difference how well-intentioned the planners are or how much computing power they command. No collective human agency could ever compile, disseminate and act upon the information required for this task. On this point, Hayek and other liberal critics of socialism were right; Lenin's cavalier assumption that running an economy was just like running a single enterprise, but on a larger scale, was a "fatal conceit".

FREE MARKET

But classical liberals were no less mistaken in their infatuation with the free market as the best attainable framework for human emancipation. For one thing, their negative conception of freedom was woefully deficient. Certainly, if people are to become autonomous agents capable of thinking for themselves, making their own choices and decisions and living in accordance with their deepest and most cherished values, then they need to be free from coercion by others – whether patriarchs, policemen and priests or bullies, bosses and bureaucrats. But they also need access to a wide range of positive, freedom-enhancing conditions, including emotional security in childhood, decent education and health-care, an adequate and regular income and a role or position in society which gives them a sense of self-respect. And if people are to enjoy equal access to these conditions so as to be equally free to make the most of their lives, then something like a welfare state is going to be needed to countervail the disequalising effects of the market.



More generally, both liberals and socialists have been at fault in failing to acknowledge that "capitalism" and "socialism" are abstractions. Neither term describes a complete, self-contained social order. "Capitalism", for example, is normally taken to mean a system in which profit-seeking firms employ

organisms, but as fully formed persons who, from cradle to grave, need and depend on each other. Another is the role of voluntary networks and associations in maintaining civil society and enabling it to flourish. And a third is the impact of human activity on its natural base – sustaining, improving or degrading it, as the case may be.

TWO-SIDED BALANCE

Thus, the central problem of economic policy is not that of finding the best mix of "market" and "state". Rather, it is one of achieving a more complex, two-sided balance: first among the different sectors of the economy – the household, voluntary, public and business sectors; and second, between economic activity as a whole and the environment in which it takes place. The task for socialists in the twenty-first century is not to work for the final and complete replacement of capitalism by some as yet untried or, indeed, unknown form of economic organisation, but to work towards a more balanced society, at every level from the local to the global, with two broad ends in view: to contain the restless expansion of capitalist commodity production and prevent it from displacing or distorting activity in the public, household and voluntary sectors, and to protect and enhance the natural base of life on Earth.

■ *David Purdy is a member of Democratic Left Scotland's national council and author of Eurovision or American Dream? Britain, the Euro and the Future of Europe (Luath Press in association with Democratic Left Scotland).*

NOTE

In my account of the history of socialism, I have freely plundered the following sources: Carl Boggs (1995) *The Socialist Tradition* (Routledge); Bernard Crick (1987) *Socialism* (Open University Press); and Adam Przeworski (1985) *Capitalism and Social Democracy* (Cambridge University Press).

Lenin's cavalier assumption that running an economy was just like running a single enterprise, but on a larger scale, was a "fatal conceit".

waged labour to produce commodities for sale on the market. Evidently, such a system cannot stand alone; it is embedded in, interacts with and depends on various social institutions – family units, political arrangements, cultural norms – which originate outside it, embody a different social logic and cannot be either allowed to wither away or commercialised without destroying such valued social assets as personal integrity, mutual trust, civic responsibility and social cohesion. There is, so to speak, an internal, moral limit on the invasive spread of the market. And what applies to non-capitalist social institutions applies no less to the natural world, humanity's ultimate asset and capitalism's external limit.

This conceptual insight has profound implications for public policy. Ever since Adam Smith, economists have been preoccupied with the relationship between "market" and "state", variously seeing it as antagonistic, complementary or some subtle combination of the two. But as feminists and Greens have been at pains to point out, such a simple, dichotomous view of the world leaves certain basic elements of economic and social life out of account. One is the informal, unpaid and home-based work of provisioning and caring that serves to reproduce human beings, both from day to day and across the generations – not of course, as asocial biological

■ Responses to this article are particularly welcome and should be sent to the editor – contact details on page 2.

DOES SCOTLAND HAVE A POPULATION PROBLEM?

The ongoing discussion about Scotland's "population problem" has focused on migration as a solution but this, suggests **Barbara MacLennan**, is an inappropriate response to a non-existent problem.

Politicians are all too prone to link population and economic growth, while failing to mention division of labour in the home ...

If it were pandas or fresh-water mussels whose populations were in decline, attention would focus on habitat and relations between the sexes. Yet when discussing Scottish population, politicians shy away from mentioning sex. Despite the fact that there is no clear correlation between changes in population and economic prosperity, politicians are all too prone to link population and economic growth, while failing to mention division of labour in the home, income differentials between men and women, and unequal power to make investment decisions in the public and the private sectors of the economy. Governments are keen on economic growth, however it occurs, for two reasons: first, they can make claims that people are better off even when the quality of life has not improved; and secondly, rising figures for production and income usually bring in higher tax revenue, without the necessity for an increase in tax rates. But the calculation of economic growth, based on questionable conventions, is complex, with tenuous links or no links at all to happiness, culture or beautiful surroundings.

FEWER CHILDREN

Economic growth is a will o' the wisp and its pursuit degrades other objectives. Scotland does not need a higher birth rate and improved education for the sake of economic growth, but rather education for its own sake and more babies because conditions that prevent

someone from having children deprive individuals of a place in human history, breaking the continuity linking each person to past generations and to the future. Women in Scotland produce fewer children than women in the rest of the UK and this matters if women, who would like to have children, do not have them. On these grounds, I reject the contention that Scotland's population, currently five million and falling, should fall further. The argument that global population threatens to destroy the planet, with too much consumption and use of resources including the atmosphere (polluted by too many ruminant animals) can be addressed differently in Scotland.

Surveys of young women suggest that they want, on average, two children – only a fraction below the birth rate of 2.1 required to maintain a stable population. Confident young women in touch with their desires can ensure that sexual relations do not jeopardise their potential to have children. In the event of failure, speedy diagnosis and prompt treatment of sexually transmitted infections can avert the danger of infertility. But, however beneficial scientific advances to combat this risk, prevention lies in the social sphere of relations between the sexes, in young women's assertiveness, self-assurance and ability to protect themselves.

There may be a lack of suitable partners for educated women. When there are equal numbers of male

and female graduates and a proportion of the men marry non-graduates then the same proportion of women must marry non-graduates. The latter partnerships would tend to be more equal since the income differential between graduates and non-graduates would offset the earnings differential between men and women. But conventional ideas are still a drawback to a partnership in which the woman has the higher education or income. Among all unequal relationships, some inequalities are more acceptable than others.

The way that commitment to the job is interpreted, as putting in long hours and having no career break, makes it more difficult for educated women in professional and managerial occupations to have children, compared to women in low-paid employment. For those who are entitled, six weeks maternity leave paid at 90 per cent of their wage is followed by 20 weeks at a flat rate of £100. Then half a year of unpaid leave allows mothers to care for infants for a variable period during their first year, albeit with loss of income. There is a proposal to extend the offer of this six months unpaid leave to fathers. At present, they are statutorily entitled to only two weeks paternity leave paid at £100 or 90% of weekly earnings, whichever is the less! If mothers went back to their employment after six months, given the differential between male and female earnings, family income could drop substantially. But this proposal, which cannot reach the statute book before 2006, signals a step towards permitting the possibility of sharing the care of infants at home during their first year of life. Though it is opposed by the CBI, the interests of commerce must not over-ride the needs of future generations.

SHORTER WORKING HOURS

After their first year, children benefit from mixing socially but though tax credit covers a percentage of costs for parents in employment, provision of child care during the most vital first three years of life is still a matter for private organisation. Part-time pre-school education available on demand to all three and four olds in Scotland must be combined with reduced, not just flexible, hours of work. It is disappointing that the objectives adopted by the TUC at the last congress did not prioritise shorter working hours, especially for men caught up in long-hours culture, nor propose other measures designed to reduce gender inequality or improve the lives of children. At present, some firms offering more than the statutory minimum find that not all paternity leave is taken. The trouble seems to be not so much that men do not want their entitlement but that workplace culture prevents them from taking it. In public sector unions, where female membership is high, paid paternity leave beyond the statutory minimum along with shorter working hours for men should be put on the agenda in a bid to change cultural attitudes. While it may be controversial to observe that Scottish culture is more macho than English culture, demographers Graham and Boyle

mention but do not pursue a suggestion that Scottish men may be less willing to take their share of child care¹. Fertility rates have fallen in all European countries over the past 30 years but they have fallen least in those which offer the best social provision for families. Whether or not comprehensive childcare provision and shorter working hours for men to allow sharing and enjoyment of family life would raise the overall birth rate in Scotland hardly matters; we would be on the way to a civilised modern society with equitable division of labour.

DIFFERENT LIFE-STYLE

While the urban habitat is not child-friendly, many people consider the countryside a good place to raise children at less risk from traffic accidents, polluted atmosphere, and drug-pushing. In villages where there are currently few employment opportunities, it may suit some people to care for their children, grow their own vegetables and live on social benefit choosing a life-style different from that promoted by the UK government policy of getting both parents into employment and working outside the home.

A concerted approach to depopulation demands affordable housing in rural areas. While Scottish building societies offer finance for self-build homes, the lack of sites in some places reinforces an already strong case for further land reform. There are other options to fish-farming: the natural and cultural resources are a basis for filming the landscape and fostering traditional craft by designing clothes to use Harris tweed. On the cultural front, music which has miraculously survived disparagement and suppression of the Gaelic language helps to keep young people in village communities and integrate incomers. Music occasions dancing and Scottish country dancing is fun. If we are to have a proper pride in the strength of Scottish culture and not be shamed by ignorance of the words of songs, beyond the first verse and chorus, the revival of Scottish languages for children in schools must provide also for two generations of adults, who did not get the opportunity to acquire fluency or literacy. The oral tradition, so important in Highland storytelling, is now valued as a resource in historical research to query the simplistic versions of the past that signal polarised attitudes to the present. In Iain Crichton Smith's emblematic story², *The Open University*, the incomer and natives are reconciled only because they are confident, in their different ways, of being able to give cultural expression to their aspirations, their bitterness and their search for peace.

INCREASED INVESTMENT AND REDUCED CONSUMPTION

More people bringing up children in the countryside, growing more vegetables, eating less meat and dairy produce (a cow causes as much global warming as a car) may further increase longevity. This can be supported by raising productivity through increased investment and reduced consumption. Furthermore,

Whether or not comprehensive childcare provision and shorter working hours for men to allow sharing and enjoyment of family life would raise the overall birth rate in Scotland hardly matters; we would be on the way to a civilised modern society with equitable division of labour.

DOES SCOTLAND HAVE A POPULATION PROBLEM?

Politicians should pay more attention to demographers who confirm that emigration is not the problem and immigration is not the answer.

since the proportion of a lifetime spent in the workforce has fallen in recent decades, there is scope to allow it to rise somewhat and cater for an aging population by allowing people to enter the workforce younger or by raising the age of retirement for those willing and able to work. The alternative of attracting low-paid foreign care-workers who, given declining social mobility, will find it difficult to integrate into the population is not responsible. It is even worse to poach health-workers, from countries that need their valuable skills, to solve the transitional problem of looking after the baby boom generation of the late 1940s as it moves through retirement to very old age.

To focus on migration as the solution to a non-existent problem is to be fixated in the past. Politicians should pay more attention to demographers who confirm that emigration is not the problem and immigration is not the answer. And it is only possible to offer refuge to those in danger in the wider world if our country really is a safe haven. The friendliness of Glaswegians is the stuff of legend but the sad fact is that Glasgow is a violent city. The priority must be to improve the environment and opportunities of existing inhabitants so that they do not resent incomers. When our society, riven by inequalities and grievances, exhibits fairness, instead of narrow-mindedness and prejudice, the country will provide an agreeable habitat capable of sustaining its present population.

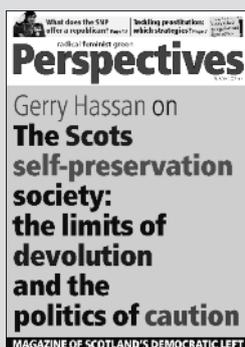
Scotland does not have a population problem; a population of five million, or even less, is just fine. It does not have a growth problem either but that is the stuff of another article. Relieved of two intractable problems, Scots, including politicians, can turn their energies instead to creating viable communities both in the cities and in the countryside. The Scottish Executive should be given credit for endorsing the revival of Scottish languages, addressing sectarianism and beginning to formulate policies on gender. But expatriates, advised on how to move back, may find their identity as Scots abroad more gratifying than the experience of returning. The drive of the "locate in Scotland" agency could better be redirected to culture-led revival of rural communities.

■ *Barbara MacLennan is a feminist economist and a contributor to the recent Scotlands of the Future (Luath Press in association with Democratic Left Scotland).*

NOTES

1. Elspeth Graham and Paul Boyle review the possible reasons for Scotland's low fertility in a chapter included in the *Review of Demographic Trends* by John Randall, until recently registrar general for Scotland.
2. Iain Crichton Smith's perhaps idealistic short story is published in *New Scottish Writing*, 1996, edited by Harry Ritchie.

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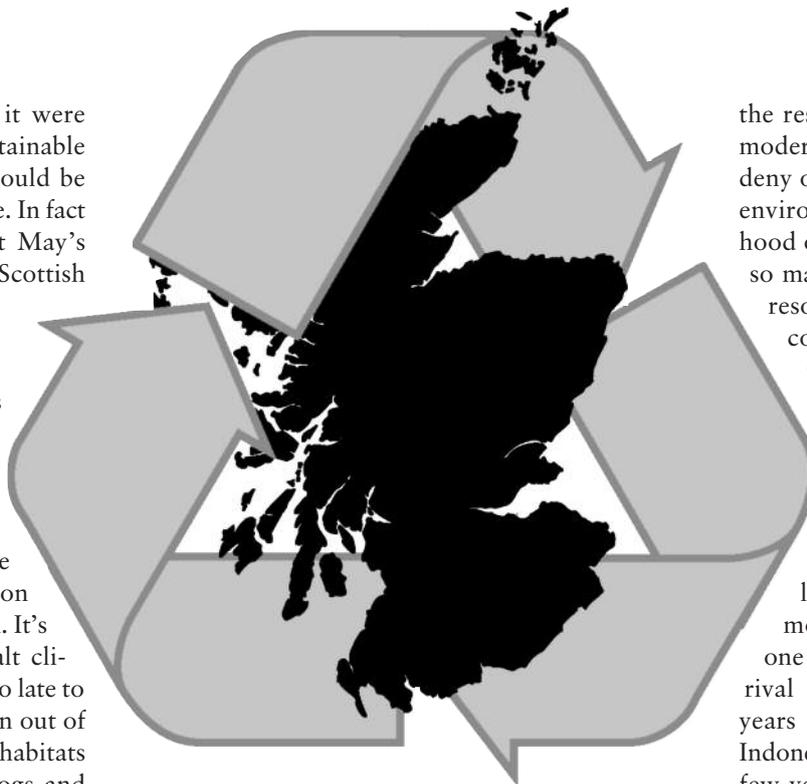
IS IT TOO LATE FOR A SUSTAINABLE SCOTLAND?

Environmentalism does not mean constraint, hardship or sacrifice. Indeed, sustainable development offers greater well-being, real choice and genuine inclusion, argues **Duncan McLaren**.

If I genuinely believed it were too late for a sustainable Scotland, then there would be no point writing this article. In fact I think the results of last May's election reflected the Scottish public's willingness and desire to pursue such an objective.

However, in some ways it is too late: for the 2000 Scottish victims of air pollution each year, or for those who will die of cancers triggered by ozone depletion, nuclear radiation or chemical contamination. It's too late to completely halt climate change. It's almost too late to keep genetic contamination out of our countryside, to save habitats such as lowland raised bogs and Caledonian forest, or to save major fisheries around our coasts. How has the "doomsday clock" got so close to striking midnight?

But first, what do I mean by a sustainable Scotland? – one that makes only a fair claim on the world's environmental resources, uses them equitably to sustain its people, and takes its responsibilities to ecological systems and other species seriously – both domestically and beyond our borders ...



ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

And this is what Friends of the Earth Scotland is all about – championing everyone's right to enjoy a clean environment and a decent quality of life in dignity – which means in turn not impinging on the rights of those in other countries or in future generations. This is what we mean by environmental justice.

Yet Scotland falls far short of this aspiration. If we look simply at

the resources we consume in our modern lifestyles, we find that we deny others their rights to a clean environment, a dignified livelihood or a decent quality of life in so many ways – in our quest for resources such as Thai prawns, coltan from the Republic of Congo, or timber from Indonesia. Cheap prawns come at the cost of mangrove swamps, key breeding grounds for fisheries, and thus at the cost of fishing communities livelihoods. Coltan, used in mobile phone manufacture, is one of the resources over which rival warlords have fought for years in the Congo. And Indonesia's rainforests are within a few years of complete clearance, yet illegal logging continues apace.

Environmental damage comes from both extraction and disposal of excess resources. Over-consumption has triggered such diverse effects as waste exports to China, acute chemical pollution in South Africa and India, and oil pollution and habitat degradation in Nigeria and Ecuador.

Overall we consume between two and five times our fair share of current global production of

How has the "doomsday clock" got so close to striking midnight?

IS IT TOO LATE FOR A SUSTAINABLE SCOTLAND?

resources. In this way we are “cheating on our neighbours” – that’s environmental injustice – and the injustice is magnified because in the majority of these cases it is the poorest amongst our fellow humans who are suffering most to provide us with the fruits of a consumer economy.

But the injustices do not stop there; we are also impinging on the rights of future generations. The impacts of nuclear wastes, genetic modification of crops (on top of years of genetic erosion of varieties), toxic chemicals in products and pollution, ozone depletion and climate change will all be felt more heavily by future generations.

Indeed when we take future generations into account, current global consumption and waste of resources is at least twice what the planet can sustain in the long term ... so when we include this the calculus, a fair level of resource consumption in Scotland would be one quarter to one tenth of what we rely on now.

CHEATING ON OUR CHILDREN

In this way we are cheating on our children also – and that’s environmental injustice too. But even that isn’t the whole story.

We are even cheating on ourselves! For all the consumption and material wealth generated we still have an unequal society here in Scotland, and one in which levels of happiness are not increased by consuming more stuff. Here perhaps is the seed of a solution – in the ill-defined space between growth and development. Clearly, if we are to discover this modern alchemist’s stone, we need to be able to measure prosperity with metrics other than consumption, growth and profit.

Whether at the national level – with the pursuit of economic growth – or the business seeking shareholder value, the primacy of economic objectives prevents us realising sustainable development. It’s all too easy to ignore the costs of growth and consumption when they are felt elsewhere – or in the

Genetically modified crops represent nothing less than a bid for corporate control over the food chain

future. Yet growth per se is not the problem; it is the mechanisms of governance that privilege growth above environmental protection, above social inclusion and even above employment and livelihoods.

When it was possible to believe in a world without limits, and the myth of trickle-down, the pursuit of growth might have been a legitimate objective, but today, with environmental limits clear and pressing, and the failures of trickle-down exposed – such that even the OECD recognises that greater equality precedes economic progress, rather than following it – it is as bankrupt an idea as the gold standard, or slavery.

ENVIRONMENTAL LUDDITES

In fact it’s increasingly clear that environmental justice and sustainable development are the progressive approach – and it is the neo-liberals who are social and environmental luddites! Whether we are talking about people as consumers, or businesses, environmentalism does not mean constraint, hardship or sacrifice. Sustainable development offers greater well-being, real choice and genuine inclusion.

The “conventional”, neo-liberal alternative is a one-way highway to hell, where we can choose any education we like (as long as it’s vocational and we can pay for it). Where we can choose any job we like (as long as we are prepared to work ever harder and suffer more and more stress merely to stand still). Where we can choose any retirement and pension we like (as long as we are prepared to invest for decades to get a pittance). Where we can enjoy holidays wherever we like (as long as we don’t want to escape from Coca-Cola and Kylie Minogue). Where the illusion of prosperity and choice is based on massive ecological degradation, driven by trade liberalisation, and corporate globalisation.

To turn around this supertanker is not a job for one year, or even one parliamentary term. But the

groundwork can be laid in how we tackle current and upcoming political issues. We can radically change the principles that guide policy choices and public understanding of the environmental agenda. A few examples can illustrate the directions we must take.

DUMPING EU SURPLUSES

Genetically modified crops represent nothing less than a bid for corporate control over the food chain ... regardless of the irreversible ecological or human health impacts. Monsanto and their allies – like Tony Blair and his new press adviser David Hill – even seek to force GM into the poorest countries in the world in their quest for profits and control. The world already produces enough food; we just fail to distribute it fairly. If we stop dumping EU surpluses, and stop annexing the best land in developing countries, most nations would need little help to have sustainable agricultural systems. In Scotland we need to declare the country GM free while it’s still practical (and if not, at least make sure there is strict liability on the GM companies for any damage done), and redirect support into sustainable, organic produce.

Blair’s support for GM is reminiscent of nothing more than a previous Labour leader’s passion for the white heat of technology – nuclear power. Talking of which, first nuclear was power too cheap to meter, now it’s the solution to climate change! The issue of nuclear waste hasn’t been solved, but the “nuclear luddites” – in their quest to wreck modern renewable energy technology – will be trying to present the nuclear decommissioning agency and proposals for underground disposal as ‘a solution’ – to fulfil the Executive pledge that there will be no new build until the disposal issue is solved.

And they will go on waging their malicious campaign against renewable energy until even seabirds offshore are complaining about the noise and visual intrusion of wind-farms. At the same time, the

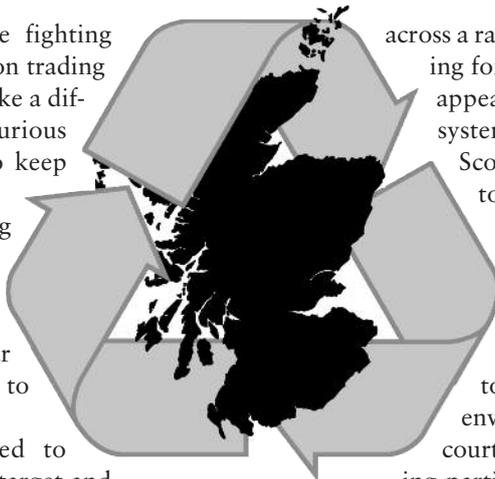
“carbon dinosaurs” are fighting back too, resisting carbon trading at a level that would make a difference, and making spurious claims that we need to keep inefficient old coal powered stations going so we can have more wind power. So those living near power stations – whether nuclear or fossil – will continue to suffer injustice.

In Scotland we need to deliver the renewables target and more – while recognising that insensitive development can create local injustice. We need clear and simple community benefits – such as co-ownership and cheaper power. We need a step change in the level of engagement with and investment in domestic energy efficiency, not just in the homes of the fuel-poor. We need mandatory energy audits and improved building regulations. But even if we deliver on the energy issues, tackling climate change will still require tackling road transport.

EXECUTIVE FAILING

And here the Executive is still failing to come to grips with the issue. Despite a substantial shift in spending – albeit not as much as they claim – they still haven’t shed the love affair with roads and cars. This holds both in the west, where they are promoting the M74 extension in Glasgow, and in the east, in Edinburgh, where they are equivocating over congestion charging. In both cases they are ignoring the large minority of households who have no access to cars. Admittedly many of these may aspire to car ownership and use, but that’s because of poor public transport and cultural pressures. Transport is a top case for the application of strategic environmental assessment (SEA). Even if the new strategy is completed before the legislation on SEA is passed, the programme must be properly scrutinised and assessed.

Delivering environmental justice demands practical action



The Executive is still failing to come to grips with the issue. Despite a substantial shift in spending they still haven’t shed the love affair with roads and cars.

across a range of fronts: providing for third party rights of appeal in the planning system; ensuring that the Scottish Pollution inventory covers a comprehensive range of pollutants, and is extended to require disclosure of inputs too; providing access to justice with effective environmental penalties, courts or tribunals; widening participation in planning decisions; and, most challenging, providing communities with rights to hold companies accountable for the injustices they inflict in Scotland and outside our borders.

CORPORATE LOBBY

We also have to ensure that politicians stop listening to companies first, and communities second: Bush paying his dues to the oil industry, Tony Blair kowtowing to the biotech industry or the European commission backing off from strong chemicals regulation in the face of industry opposition – all of these redouble the environmental injustices citizens have to face. The corporate lobby has done a great job of convincing politicians all over the world that liberalisation, privatisation and deregulation are the way to prosperity and sustainability – however much this flies in the face of logic and all the evidence. But this can be reversed if we simply accept that companies must be accountable to all those they affect, and not just to their investors – and take political action to deliver the rights for communities and rules for big business that could ensure this. If we fail, then it will be too late for a green Scotland.

Friends of the Earth Scotland will continue to engage with a political campaign agenda; we will continue to analyse and benchmark manifestos, work with other environmental NGOs in the “everyone” campaign (which provided a strong manifestation of the Scottish public’s desire for environmental political change) and

we will continue working on specific issues in the Scottish Parliament, where we will collaborate tactically with any party where our objectives coincide, and criticise any party which works against environmental justice. We will also welcome MSPs of any party into our membership. (I’m proud to have both Jack McConnell and Robin Harper amongst others as members of FOES.)

THREE CHALLENGES

In conclusion I want briefly to draw out three challenges for politicians who seek sustainable development, faced with this context and political agenda:

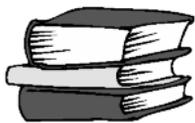
1. Adding implementation to influence. This term being a “green conscience” or putting down a few dissenting motions is not enough. MSPs committed to sustainable development must work across party boundaries to deliver new legislation and policy.
2. Exposing the limitations of the devolution settlement which, for example, prevents Scotland reforming fiscal policy and trade policy to deliver sustainability. In this respect committed MSPs must push at the limits of what the Parliament sees as its role, as Mark Ruskell has done with the GM Liability Bill.
3. Using the coalition’s commitment to environmental justice to leverage progress on a comprehensive conception of inter-generational and global environmental justice.

With a progressive alliance between MSPs, activists and NGOs like Friends of the Earth Scotland, a sustainable Scotland can still be achieved.

■ *Duncan McLaren is Chief Executive of Friends of the Earth Scotland. This article is based on a speech made to the Scottish Green Party in Edinburgh on 25th October 2003. To join Friends of the Earth Scotland call 0131-554 9977 or visit www.foe-scotland.org.uk*

POLITICS AND BOOKS

Jane Corrie has been reading a book about books: the books that fascinated and informed early generations of socialists and trade unionists.



“The poets helped me to escape the demands of communal living which now, at 13, were beginning to be intolerable to me.”

My grandfather was born in South Wales in 1899 and spent much of his working life as a railwayman – travelling up and down the Great Western line from South Devon to London. I have among my books two that belonged to him: *Sartor Resartus* by Thomas Carlyle and *Self Help* by Samuel Smiles. Neither was light reading for the 11 year old who clambered onto the platform to receive them as Sunday School prizes in 1910.

Of course these books are full of personal significance for me, but recently I have come to see them in a broader context. The dauntingly titled *Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* by Stefan Rose sets these actual books in their place as part of a great and now almost forgotten tradition of autodidact reading. This ugly word is unfortunately the best available to describe the reading done by men and women with a hunger for knowledge and great literature; educating themselves through cheap books or libraries, but with little access to formal education beyond their early teens. Rose describes how this informal multi-faceted “autodidact movement” gathered pace throughout the nineteenth century, peaking in the years that followed my grandfather’s prizes, then declining sharply after the Second World War until it all but disappeared in the 1960s. Its end was marked by the easier access to further education and the building of all those “white tile” universities initiated by the Wilson government and enjoyed by my own generation.

BOTH INSPIRED AND ACTIVE

The autodidact tradition existed alongside the more structured socialist traditions outlined by David Purdy elsewhere in this issue of *Perspectives*. Both traditions came together in the lives of individuals who were both inspired by their reading and active within formal political movements, such as the railway unions and Labour Party that became important to my grandfather. In his book about the books people read, Stefan Rose has stitched together a huge and compelling story from the evidence of personal memoirs: educational archives, oral histories, Mass Observation studies and early social surveys. The book is dense with tables, quotations and footnotes and the paperback edition is not easy to read in the edition I came across (Yale University paperback – 500 plus pages of tiny text).

But this is to speak of the book’s weight and to give nothing of its flavour. Here is Will Crooks, one of the first Labour MPs, growing up in extreme poverty in East London; Crooks spent 2d on a second-hand *Iliad* and was dazzled.

“What a revelation it was to me! Pictures of romance and beauty I had never dreamed of suddenly

opened up before my eyes. I was transported from the East End to an enchanted land. It was a rare luxury for a working lad like me just home from work to find myself suddenly among the heroes and nymphs of ancient Greece.”

And here is Dorothy Burnham (born 1915) who grew up in an overcrowded home (“circumstances that would have affronted the dignity of a guinea pig”). After her family disintegrated and she moved to a hostel she found refuge and privacy in Keats, Tennyson and Arnold. “Communication between these poets and myself was instantaneous. I saw with delighted amazement that all poetry had been written specially for me. Although I spoke – in my back street accents – of La Belle Dame Sans Merky – yet in Keats I seemed to sense some essence of the eternal ritual of romantic love. And Tennyson’s *Morte D’Arthur* bowled me over, I read it again and again until I fairly lived in the world of ‘armies that clash by night’ and stately weeping Queens. So the poets helped me to escape the demands of communal living which now, at 13, were beginning to be intolerable to me.”

INTELLECTUAL HUNGER

There are two features of the many individual stories in this book that are strikingly recurrent. Firstly, that learning about the world through books on one’s own often begins with the kind of epiphany described in these extracts – a sudden broadening out of horizons and appreciation of life’s potential richness and variety. Secondly, that this broadening out is often effected by the same authors. In the first eleven, so to speak, are Shakespeare, the Bible, Bunyan, Defoe, Carlyle, Dickens and Ruskin. And close behind them come Shelley, Browning, Byron, Scott, Homer, Emerson, Arnold and Macaulay. These authors include some (Scott, Macaulay, Carlyle) not exactly famous for their “left of centre” views. Certain texts – sometimes timelessly great, but sometimes not – lend themselves more easily to being read at many different levels. These texts are more likely to answer the needs of a diverse unschooled audience alike only in its intellectual hunger – and time and again individuals gravitate towards them.

Rose sees the flexibility of the texts that inspired working class readers as ultimately undermining of all ideologies – and even offers this as one of the significant factors in the limited success of formal working class political structures in Britain. He aligns himself squarely with Matthew Arnold – quoting from *Culture and Anarchy* at the beginning of his opening chapter.

“(culture) does not try to teach down to the level of the inferior classes, it does not try to win them for this

or that sect of its own, with ready made judgements and watchwords. It seeks to do away with classes; to make the best that has been known and thought in the world current everywhere.”

Although Rose admits that Arnold’s words find echoes in the educational theories of Gramsci, Lenin and Trotsky, his fundamentally “anti-ideological” position leads him to some harsh comments about the practice of party Communism and the nature of Marxist thought. In fact this book is a major challenge to just about every “ism” and “ology” of the 19th and 20th centuries, though Rose’s most ferocious brickbats are reserved for modernism and the way in which certain writers (such as those of the Bloomsbury group) sought to distance themselves from the “half educated”.

But Rose’s book tells of many individuals who were inspired by their reading to achieve much for the structures he sometimes likes so little. One of the most interesting of the book’s tables is that listed by the *Review of Reviews* in 1910. Coinciding with my grandfather’s youthful success at Sunday School the review published a list of “Favourite authors of Labour Party MPs”. Here is an instance of individuals emerging from a strongly autodidactic (and often non-conformist) tradition coming together in a new and profoundly influential political structure.

In order of number of mentions – starting with 17 and ending with four – the list of authors reads: Ruskin, Dickens, the Bible, Carlyle, Henry George, Scott, Mill, Shakespeare, Burns, Bunyan, Tennyson, Mazzini, Kingsley, Macaulay, James Russell Lowell, the Webbs, Adam Smith, Cobbett, Thackeray, JR Green, Darwin, Henry Drummond.

COLLECTIVE PUBLIC GOOD

Interesting – in view of Robin Harper’s recent motion to the Scottish Parliament on land value taxation – to see Henry George so high up this list. Maybe not such a problem to a 21st century reader as Carlyle, whose baroque prose style makes him difficult to read. Also Carlyle’s somewhat manic championing of individualism (he has been known as the “Scottish Nietzsche”) is hard to take. Today the dominance of free market ideology and the banal mantras of “consumer choice” seem to eat away at the possibilities of collective public good. In our personal relations, in our work life and in our cultural activities we live with the triumph of individualism and its result, “the commodification of everything”. But Rose reminds us through the voices of working class readers that worse than too much individualism is no possibility of individualism at all. Writers such as Carlyle – and Samuel Smiles, the author of my grandfather’s other book – pointed the way out. They lifted their readers above the cramping circumstances of poverty and labour and helped them to imagine and work towards a different world.

Although they were cut off from formal education at an early age, the working class readers of the 19th and early 20th century were fostered by a wide range

of locally based and locally run institutions. These included the different Sunday School movements – the many trade and industry based institutes and affordable subscription libraries for mutual improvement. The idea of mutual improvement found early expression among the writers and thinkers of the Scottish Enlightenment and some of the first public libraries in the world were set up in Scotland in the early years of the 19th century.

FROM ECONOMICS TO WHALING

Traditions of reading and opportunities for doing so were particularly strong early in the nineteenth century among miners and weavers in lowland Scotland. From a community of the latter in Peebles came a very influential figure in the autodidact story, Robert Chambers. When his family was bankrupted by the Napoleonic Wars (French prisoners of war left town without paying their bills), Robert and his brother William brought the family books to Edinburgh to sell. On the proceeds of this venture they set up a small printing press and produced the first newspaper in Scotland affordable by working people (¼d as compared with 7d for a *Scotsman*). Following the instant and continuing success of this venture, Robert Chambers became an extraordinarily prolific and successful writer and publisher. His greatest achievement remembered now is *Vestiges of Creation*, a book about the origins of life on earth which did a great deal to stir up public concern about Darwinian ideas 15 years before Darwin himself published his *Origin of the Species*. But even more influential in their time were the editions of the *Chambers Edinburgh Journal* – a monthly compendium of articles of useful knowledge. These periodicals covered a vast range of subjects from economics to whaling and from classical authors to new theories about agriculture. Chartists and Owenite socialists for example relied on Chambers for their scientific information. The first issue (1832) sold 25,000 copies, all in Scotland. National circulation peaked at 87,000 in 1844. Well into the 20th century radicals and self-improvers testified to the value of the journal and the many other cheap educational texts Chambers published.

Chambers’ story and the story of the many individual working class readers Rose has detailed deserve to be remembered when we look at where we have come from and the history and traditions that have nourished us. Rose’s great achievement is to have pulled together for the first time ever a mass of evidence about what people with little formal education actually thought about their reading. On a personal level this has led me to see more than my grandfather’s love of literature in those particular prize books. Viewed in the wider perspective, this study illuminates a neglected but vital aspect of the development of the socialist tradition in Britain.

■ Jane Corrie is the Project Development Worker of Democratic Left Scotland.

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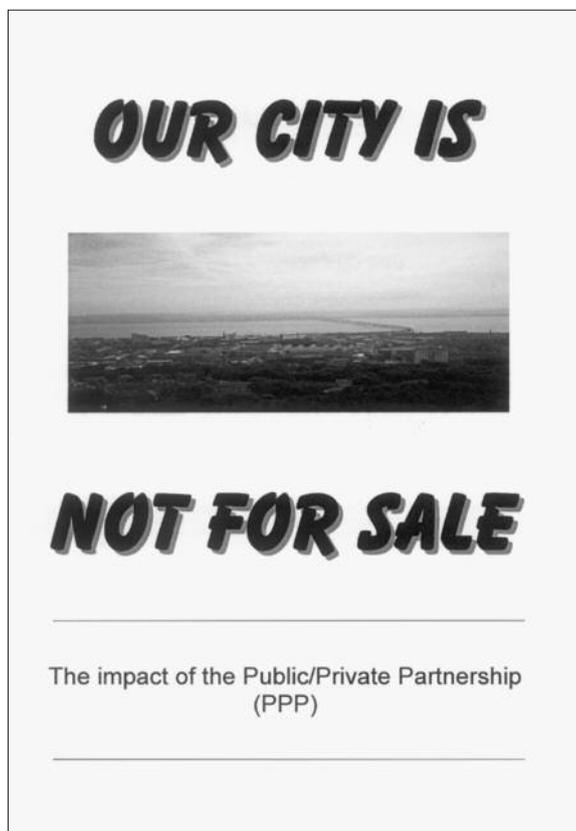
OUR CITY IS **NOT** FOR SALE

December 2003 saw the launch in Dundee of *Our City is Not For Sale – the impact of the Public/Private Partnership (PPP)*. This document is an important statement of resistance by public service trade unions to the privatisation of essential services in Scotland's fourth city. The process that surrounds this publication will however be of greater importance. The work that is related to the use of this publication opens the way to constructing alliances that go beyond resistance and will begin discussions regarding a different future for Dundee.

DAMAGING PUBLIC SECTOR EMPLOYMENT

Our City is Not For Sale has been published by the Dundee City Council Trade Union Liaison Committee. It draws on their work with Dexter Whitfield of the Sheffield-based Centre for Public Services. The commissioning of this document was motivated by a recognition that uncritically embracing the economic orthodoxy that promotes Private Public Partnership (PPPs) would damage public sector employment in Dundee. Additionally, it will bring misery for service users and spell disaster for the city's citizens that pay Council Tax. The propaganda onslaught that has surrounded Dundee's schools PPP was unprecedented and was born of the view that "there is no alternative."

So this is where *Our City* begins. After acknowledging the force of the global- and Blair-led pressure for these type of measures it focuses on the school-based PPP programmes across Britain. It makes frightening reading. From East Lothian to London, from Glasgow to Brighton, we can see studied examples of private-sector-led



Our City is Not for Sale – The impact of the Public/Private Partnership (PPP)

commissioned by Dundee City Council Trade Union Liaison Group

delays, inferior design, poor quality and financial problems. These are real stories affecting real school students and communities across the UK. They are not isolated incidents. Audit Scotland and Audit Commission findings are used to make the universal case – Public Private Partnerships are not working.

COMPLEX APPROACH

The story, however, does not stop there. Drawing on the experience of the Newcastle trade unions, a campaign has been launched in Dundee. Far from relying on a simplistic slogan of "Public – Good, Private – Bad", a more complex approach is being taken. Discussions have begun with members of the Tenants Federation, the Social Inclusion Partnership, the Anti-Poverty Forum and the Community

and Voluntary Alliance. This approach, while fragile but beginning to bear fruit, is the of type that will be required if the document's demand for an "alternative modernisation strategy" is to be realised. Alternative modernisation is posed in opposition to "modernisation through markets". Importantly, it does not simply call for a defence of the old.

DEMOCRATIC RELATIONSHIP

The political differences to the dominant approach that is presently being taken to public services and local government are highlighted. The fetish of management and continuous efficiency is countered by the vision of building a new, more democratic relationship between communities and public sector workers and the environment. The conversation at the launch was one of quality services and quality jobs.

The magnitude of what is being suggested is not underestimated but neither are the stakes. Links are made to social forums at a European and global level. European fiscal mechanisms are challenged and the present position at the UK Government and Scottish Executive are acknowledged.

What is clear, however, is when the price of inaction is the sale of your city then people will get involved. Action that involves radical demonstration and increased public investment may appear ambitious, but it marks a real alternative: one that others can follow.

Stuart Fairweather

■ Copies of *Our City is Not for Sale* can be obtained from Dundee Anti-Poverty Forum's Information Service on dundeeantipoverty@hotmail.com

GOD AND PI

If you are wondering why I am writing about a book that has been out for over a year, well, I confess that books can often take a while to filter up to the top of my pile, particularly novels. However, I found myself reflecting on novels' conclusions and decided that despite the lapse in time, it might still be worth reviewing for those like me for whom books have a timeless quality (well that's my excuse and I'm sticking to it).

Other than that I don't know quite what drew me to *Life of Pi* – as a committed atheist I am not sure why a book that claimed at the outset that it was a story that would make you believe in God should draw me; maybe it was just the intrigue (and of course the reviews – it did win the Man Booker prize in 2002 after all).

So what did I get? A beautifully written, wonderfully funny, absurdly imaginative, thought-provoking tale that starts with the preposterous scenario of a 16 year old boy (Pi) surviving for seven months while lost at sea on a life



Life of Pi
by Yann Martel
(Canongate,
£7.99)

boat while co-habiting with a 450lb Bengal tiger. However, the story is told with such plausible vigour that by the end we are far more willing to believe this tale than the more dreary alternative that Pi offers to the sunken ship's insurance brokers at the story's conclusion.

In the first part of the story we learn of Pi's childhood as the son of the zookeeper in Pondicherry. Pi learns much about animals as he grows up at the zoo and teaches us the ways of animals, captured and wild, and how to keep them content and controlled. Throughout the book much is told anecdotally – how a mouse survived for weeks in a cage of vipers, how some goats shared an enclosure with a group of rhinos, and how man is the most dangerous animal in a zoo.

“In a general way we mean how our species' excessive predatory instincts have made the entire planet our prey. More specifically, we have in mind the people who feed fishhooks to the otters, razors

to the bears, apples with small nails in them to the elephants and hardware variations on the theme.”

It is in this first section that we also learn of Pi's quest to find God. Born into the Hindu faith, he ventures first into Christianity and then Islam, managing to practise all three simultaneously, until he is confronted by the priest, the pandit, and the imam, who by chance all converge on him while on a stroll with his parents. After some short bickering, Pi is told he must “choose” his faith.

For me, this was the point of the novel – that you can take out of the book what you wanted, that in the end we all believe what we *want* to believe, whether religious, spiritualist, materialist, or political ideology. No matter how much is moulded from social construction, how much of it is imprinted into our DNA, at some point we all make some leap of faith (not necessarily a religious one) and choose the set of values that guide our life.
Steve Mathewson

radical feminist green Perspectives Circulation manager

Perspectives is looking for a volunteer to help manage subscription records and develop and monitor circulation of Democratic Left Scotland's quarterly magazine. This will probably require a couple of hours per week on average, though this can be flexible within the quarterly production cycle, and attendance at **Perspectives** group meetings every three months. Out of pocket expenses will be re-imbursed.

For further information, or to express interest, please contact Jane Corrie at Democratic Left Scotland's office (address and phone details on page 2).

SCOTLAND'S GENDER DEFICIT

Jean Cuthbert (below) and **Mhairi McGowan** (right) offer responses to Sue Innes's article in the last issue of *Perspectives*.

Sue Innes's article ("Scotland's Gender Deficit", *Perspectives* autumn 2003) provided a stimulating and inspiring overview of feminist struggles in Scotland over the past thirty years. As she said in the article, feminism in Scotland has to be "outside, inside and somewhere in between" in order to effect change. Here are some thoughts sparked off by her article and some reflections on developments since the article was written.

Sue's article made me think that there is a need for a "Grit and Diamonds 1990–2000" to record some of the work of that decade before it is forgotten. Any interested publishers out there? (*Grit and Diamonds 1980–1990* was published by a small, long-defunct, women's publishing collective). All too often women's energies (mine included!) are so immersed in the "doing" (including the doing of unpaid caring labour) that time is not spent on recording and reflection. That is partly why Sue's organisation, Engender, the Scottish women's information research and networking organisation, is such an essential ground breaker, straddling this divide in creative ways.

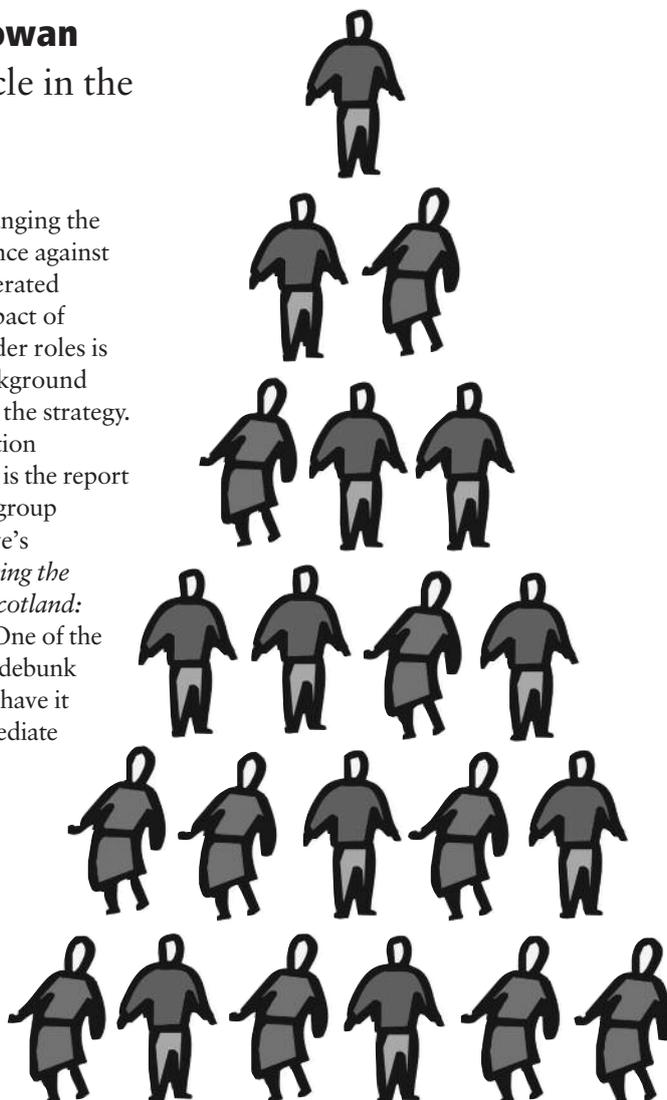
Since Sue's article was written there have been some encouraging developments and events for girls and women in Scotland.

- The publication in November of the Scottish Executive's draft *Sexual Health and Relationships Strategy* which acknowledges the impact of gendered sexual violence on health and wellbeing and recommends the allocation of resources to sexual assault centres.

The importance of changing the climate in which violence against women and girls is tolerated is highlighted. The impact of media images and gender roles is included in the six background papers associated with the strategy.

- Another key publication launched in November is the report of a short life working group formed by the Executive's Equalities Unit, *Improving the Position of Women in Scotland: An Agenda for Action*. One of the aims of the report is to debunk the myth that "women have it all" and to set out immediate and medium term objectives for change. It points out that the gendering of school subjects and jobs is not being tackled and that women's representation in local government remains at 22%. In fact, it reiterates a lot of what Sue said in her *Perspectives* article. Remember, you read it in *Perspectives* first!

- Another landmark for women is the 25th anniversary of Edinburgh Women's Rape and Sexual Abuse Centre (formerly Edinburgh Rape Crisis Centre), a small voluntary organisation supporting girls and women who have experienced sexual violence at any time in their lives. They were offered a civic reception by City of Edinburgh Council at the City Chambers on the 25th November, UN International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women. As Sheila Gilmore (the councillor heading Housing and Communities and a



One of the aims of the report is to debunk the myth that "women have it all".

founder member of the Centre) pointed out, twenty five years ago they would not have been offered a civic reception. Women and girls spoke out even less then about abuse than they do today.

- November also saw the announcement by the Executive of a fund of £1½m over two years. Announcing the fund, Margaret Curran said "We know only too well that sexual violence against women and children prevails throughout Scotland. Rape and sexual abuse are despicable acts that have devastating and lasting effects on women's physical and emotional wellbeing."

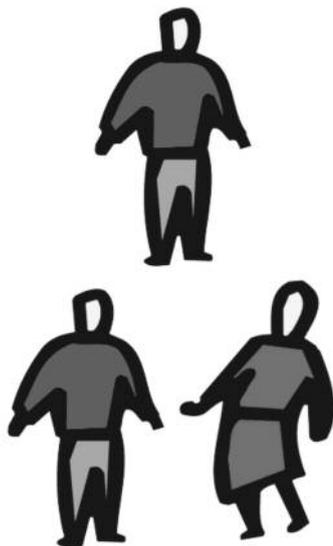
Half a million is a start. We know that the estimated cost to society of domestic abuse in Greater Glasgow alone was over £3 million in 1995!

● Lastly, maybe Sue could write a regular column to give feminism more of a voice and to “mainstream” feminist issues into *Perspectives*!

Jean Cuthbert

■ *Jean Cuthbert has worked in feminist social movement organisations in Scotland for the past 15 years, including Rape Crisis and Women’s Aid. She writes this from a personal perspective.*

What a joy it was to read Sue Innes’s article! It reminded me of the same women’s liberation conference. There we were – a wee women’s group from the Vale of Leven who, in International Women’s Year (1975), made a series of six films around the issues of women’s position in society. The coordinator and inspiration for it all was an amazing feminist tutor from the Workers Educational Association. Funding came from Europe for deprived communities in the shape of the Quality of Life Experiment. Suddenly we had Vale TV, made possible by the fact that the Vale had cable TV – years before it was fashionable. I was dragged along to the women’s group by Marion Easdale and was hooked immediately. The films lasted around 20 minutes and covered issues such as childcare, equal pay, trade unions and media images. They were shown over six weeks and we did everything ourselves – acting, shooting, directing and producing. Then Jenny (the tutor) arrived one day and announced we had a slot at the forthcoming women’s liberation conference in Partick. Panic set in! What could we possibly offer? We tried desperately to get Jenny to do it on her own but to no avail – so off we went. We were totally



overwhelmed by the WLM conference. It was unlike anything we’d ever seen before, was most definitely not a traditional working class atmosphere, alien yet not! Some of us had never been to any conferences. I was used to the strict discipline of a trade union or Communist Party conference and the impact of a woman-only space was incredible. Anyway, we showed the film about media images and in the post-film discussion, found common ground across normal class divisions. The power of that kind of independent social movement was instantly palpable yet at the same time unpredictable. Following the conference, we began to take the films around local community organisations and the power and sisterhood of that conference stayed with us.

As my work now is in a feminist woman-only space, that power of the sisterhood is still there, but it’s undoubtedly different. Women’s experiences are different; the impact of the improvements that Sue talked about have been integrated into our lives, yet inequality remains. I cannot agree more that we need to move beyond our current position, remembering with pride what we have achieved and in reality what we still need to do. We do indeed have a long way to go.

For example, when women live with domestic abuse and have children, society has an expectation that they should leave that abusive situation due to the

Questions need to be asked at each stage of the parliamentary and subsequent process. Questions like what is the effect of this legislation on women and on men? Does the legislation really answer the concerns we are trying to address?

effect of the abuse on the children. In Strathclyde every time the police are called to a domestic abuse incident a report is sent to the social work department. Following an internal assessment, the household may be visited by social workers, especially if it’s not the first report. Some women decide to leave and some decide never to call the police again. Yet, when the woman does leave and is pursued by her ex-partner for contact and residency of the children, the same society says that an abusive partner is not necessarily a bad dad. A recent report in England and Wales showed that out of 61,356 requests for contact, less than 1% (518) were refused, down from 3% in 1998. In an in-depth study of 300 out of the 61,000 plus requests, 61% alleged domestic abuse and in one third of those there was supporting evidence. 94% of the 300 were granted contact. Mixed messages indeed – the woman continues to be abused via the child contact and his part in the process is invisible.

Perhaps one way of changing this is by ensuring that gender proofing moves beyond the rhetorical. Questions need to be asked at each stage of the parliamentary and subsequent process. Questions like what is the effect of this legislation on women and on men? Does the legislation really answer the concerns we are trying to address? There needs to be a process of review so that an issue is not seen as done and dusted without a proper social and gender audit. Courts and local authorities need to be asking themselves the same questions. We can change society but only by ensuring the pressure on political institutions remains and develops. Sue’s idea of reorientation within and across society is a must.

Mhairi McGowan

■ *Mhairi McGowan works for Greater Easterhouse Women’s Aid and is a member of Democratic Left Scotland.*

■ **Letters and contributions (which we may edit) are welcome and should be sent to the editor – contact details on page 2.**

People and politics

In Scotland, as in the rest of Britain, there is widespread disillusionment with politics. The mainstream parties have lost touch with ordinary people and issues are trivialised and distorted by the media.

We are continually told that “there is no alternative” to global capitalism. Yet this is doing untold damage to our environment, our communities and the quality of our lives, while millions of people remain poor and powerless because the market dominates our society and we do too little to protect and empower them.

Democratic Left Scotland is a non-party political organisation that works for progressive social change through activity in civil society – in community groups, social movements and single-issue campaigns – seeking at all times to promote discussion and alliances across the lines of party, position and identity.

Political parties remain important, but they need to reconnect with the citizens they claim to represent, reject the copycat politics that stifles genuine debate and recognise that no single group or standpoint holds all the answers to the problems facing our society.

We are trying to develop a new kind of politics, one that starts from popular activity – in workplaces, localities and voluntary associations – and builds bridges to the world of parties and government, on the one hand, and the world of ideas and culture, on the other.

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Our approach to politics is radical, feminist and green.

Radical because we are concerned with the underlying, structural causes of problems such as poverty, inequality, violence and pollution and aspire towards an inclusive, more equal society in which everyone is supported and encouraged to play a full part, within a more just and sustainable world.

Feminist because we seek to abolish the unequal division of wealth, work and power between men and women and to promote a better understanding of the intimate connections between personal life and politics.

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