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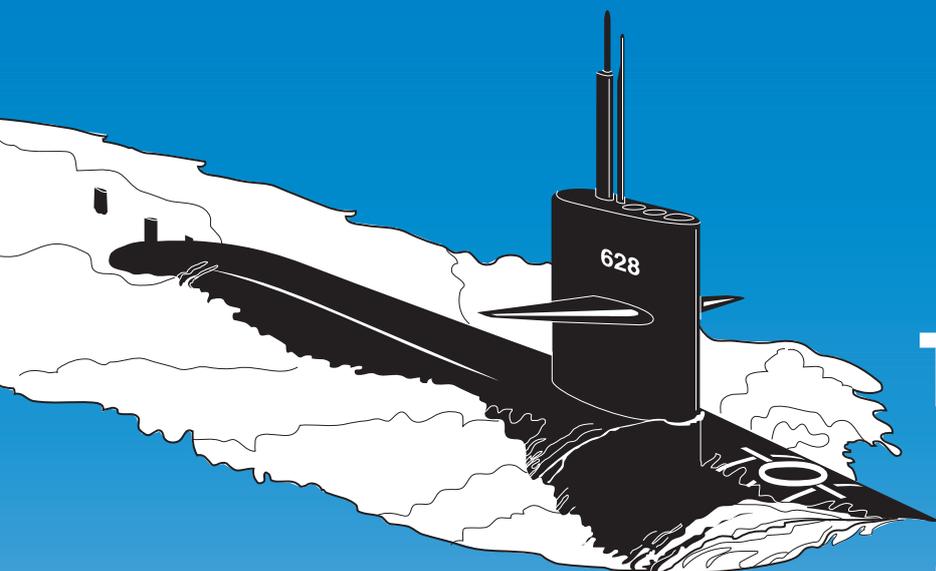
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Palestine** Page 16

radical feminist green

Perspectives

No 12 / SUMMER 2006 / £2

ENERGY, THE ENVIRONMENT AND ARMAGEDDON



THE NUCLEAR DEBATE RE-SURFACES

MAGAZINE OF SCOTLAND'S DEMOCRATIC LEFT

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No 12, summer 2006

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EDITORIAL

THE NUCLEAR DEBATE

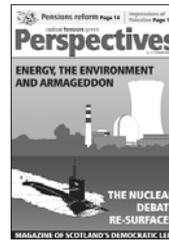
There's no getting away from it, the nuclear debate has well and truly arrived back on the surface of day-to-day politics – reflected in this issue of *Perspectives*.

Not only do we have articles on energy policy, the Greens' position and the Faslane 365 campaign, but, quite coincidentally, the nuclear issue is also touched on by Eurig Scandrett in his regular column opposite.

In fact a number of factors have come together in recent weeks to put the issue firmly back on the political agenda: on the one hand the government's review of provision for future energy needs and, on the other, Gordon Brown's intervention declaring support for a successor to the Trident nuclear weapons system – a matter of special interest to Scots as the submarines which carry the missiles are based not far from Glasgow at Faslane.

What's interesting about the debate on nuclear power and future energy needs is the way that green arguments are being mobilised by the supporters of nuclear power: it is promoted as a carbon-neutral source of energy when in production (though that argument hardly applies in the construction stage). This view of the environmental *benefits* of nuclear power is totally at odds with the traditional green position, sketched out by Shiona Baird MSP in her article, of opposition to this form of energy generation.

Michael Prior sets out briefly the history of nuclear power's development in Britain (inextricably linked with military uses) and considers whether it may have a meaningful future in the context of stemming global warming and rising sea levels. He also touches on energy conservation, pointing out that besides central regulatory action, individual lifestyle change could make a huge difference in cutting fossil fuel usage – but that



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

would entail big big changes for each of us as individuals – but are we up for it? Nothing less than a cultural revolution is required!

Lurking beneath the waves for some time, the nuclear weapons issue has re-surfaced following Gordon Brown's remarks about Britain needing a successor system when Trident is finally scrapped in the 2020s. David Mackenzie and Rebecca Johnson put the arguments against nuclear weapons and explain the ambitious plans of the Faslane 365 campaign to bring together thousands of people in blockades of Faslane.

Away from the nuclear issue, David Purdy looks at the question of pensions, and argues for a democratic solution to the current crisis: a system of entitlement based on citizenship rather than individual working record.

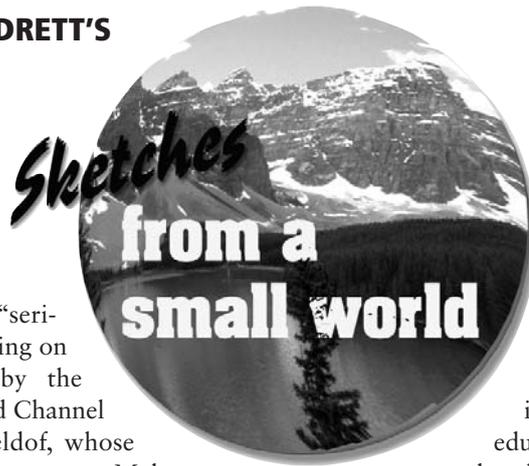
Continuing on the international theme that we have introduced in the last few issues, Democratic Left Scotland member Liz Marshall reports of her visit to meet the Palestinian producers of goods imported for sale in the shop she works in as a volunteer in Edinburgh. Her words provide insights on the lives of Palestinian people so often missing from the regular news reports of atrocities, sponsored by whoever, in this part of the world.

Lastly, Ray Newton offers his thoughts on how we might tackle Britain's democratic crisis – public cynicism towards politicians, low voter turn-out for elections etc. – and revitalise the body politic in this country. This is not an academic question as surely an active and informed population is a prerequisite for the sort of society the democratic left would like to see develop.

Thanks as usual to all the contributors to this issue and, if any of the articles prompts disagreement (or even agreement!), please write us a letter for publication.



EURIG SCANDRETT'S



One year on from the G8, the “serious” media have been reflecting on what has been achieved by the summit in Gleneagles. This included Channel 4 News’ “guest reporter” Bob Geldof, whose contribution to the people’s movement to Make Poverty History is considerable: as spoiler, for organising a rock concert in London when the NGOs were trying to get people to the march in Edinburgh; as uncle Tom, for breaking ranks with the protesters’ demands by applauding the “achievements” of Tony Blair at the summit; as turncoat, for becoming advisor on such issues to David Cameron’s new Tories.

G8s (and G7s) never achieve anything. The greatest claim for Gleneagles was the debt cancellation of some of the poorest African countries which – whilst locally significant – is selective, tied to western-style reform and was probably the product of a series of bilateral agreements brokered by Gordon Brown, rather than the G8.

Talking of Gordon Brown, the question is, why has he decided to back the continuation of Britain’s “independent nuclear deterrent”?* Is he so desperate to get the ultimate prize of Prime Ministerial office that he is prepared to ditch any principles that get in the way? Does he care more about Labour gains in *Express*-reading middle England than Labour losses in Scotland, including perhaps, control of the Scottish Executive? Is he playing canny, creating a smoke screen of left wing ire in order to get into a position to enact all the things he would have done 20 years ago? Is it an opportunity for Jack McConnell to distance himself from Labour in Westminster on an popular issue about which he can do nothing, in order to hold back any nationalist resurgence?

Several issues may fall into the latter category, from the superficial (supporting anyone but England at the world cup) to the potentially useful (opposing nuclear power until problem of waste is resolved). Moreover, opportunities exist to drive a wedge between Scottish and New Labour on the issue which has caused the most disgraceful behaviour in government: asylum. That we continue to treat people who have escaped tyranny with prejudice, repression, exclusion and humiliation is bad enough. That the wealth of this country has been gained at the expense of the exploitation of others is worse. That senior politicians justify this treatment of refugee seekers with racism and denial is unforgivable.

The Unity Centre is a new campaign in Glasgow which supports asylum seekers, assists them to organ-

Is he so desperate to get the ultimate prize of Prime Ministerial office that he is prepared to ditch any principles that get in the way?

ise and campaigns on their behalf. With an office close to where asylum seekers sign on in Ibrox, it has successfully mobilised on issues such as dawn raids and exclusion from education, using tactics of welfare rights support and parliamentary lobbying through to direct action. Relying on volunteer activists and personal donations to function it represents the best of grassroots organising.

A meeting in the parliament at the end of June addressed another aspect of international refuge: the trafficking in women and children for prostitution. Currently, trafficked women are treated in law as illegal immigrants and can simply be deported back to where traffickers can trace them. The European Convention on Trafficking however proposes that trafficked prostitutes should not immediately be deported, but rather given a “reflection period” of at least 30 days, during which social, medical and psychological support can be provided. Amnesty International is campaigning for the UK to sign and ratify this convention.

Having moved into higher education in the last year I’ve become more aware of the corruption of that sector – not that HE has any more or less corrupt individuals in it than anywhere else, but rather that the corruptions of marketing education, commodifying knowledge, individualising learners and standardising curricula are everywhere to be seen. The industrial dispute between lecturers and university employers over pay – and the action taken by AUT and NATFHE (now merged as the University and College Union) – is just one aspect of a wider political malaise which universities have got into. On the other hand there are spaces for resistance, and people willing to stick their neck out and exploit opportunities to make the intellectual resources of higher education accessible and accountable to those who could best use it to change society, the poorest and excluded and those who campaign on their behalf.

■ *Eurig Scandrett is an environmental activist and member of Democratic Left Scotland.*

* The answer to the substantial question of the replacement of Trident could be answered by the mobilisation currently occurring in civil society – environmentalists and the women’s organisations, the churches and the community groups, trades unions and professional associations, socialists and anarchists – Trident 365, the campaign to stop the replacement of Trident.

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.

What does Democratic Left add?

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.

Green because we believe that our present system of economic organisation is socially and environmentally destructive, and that a more balanced relationship between human activity and nature will be better for us, for our descendants and for the other animal species with whom we share the planet.

There's
more
to politics
than
parties

✂

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Membership is open to anyone who shares our general outlook and commitments. Whilst many of our members are involved in a range of political parties, others are not.



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Democratic Left Scotland
na Deamocrataich Chli an Alba



NUCLEAR POWER: ISSUES

The government's recent review of future energy needs has re-fuelled the debate about nuclear power and the environment. Energy and environment consultant **Michael Prior** chews over the issues.

This is an attempt to set out, briefly, the issues involved in the nuclear power debate in a non-technical fashion and as even-handedly as is possible. Both these limits are difficult, possibly impossible. The debate over new nuclear stations is so polarised and so littered with technical assertions to back the polarities that unbiased comment is very difficult. Certainly, I should briefly set out my own position.

I have worked as an independent energy and environment consultant for over twenty-five years in the course of which I appeared at both the Sizewell and the Hinkley Point public inquiries as a witness for the opposition. I have been, broadly, against the construction of new nuclear facilities ever since but am also aware that the imminence and scale of climate change provides a new dimension to the issue. Unless radical and long-lasting measures are put in place very soon, it is

If ... nuclear power offers a significant contribution to the huge cuts in carbon emissions necessary to avoid this bleak scenario ... then so be it.

very likely that the centre of London will be regularly underwater come 2050. Perhaps one could learn to live with that but a good deal less tolerable will be the displacement of tens of millions of people from countries like Bangladesh just at a time when the economies of Europe, Japan and North America are being wrecked by the gradual disappearance of some of their major cities (think New York, Amsterdam and Kobe for starters) and agricultural areas. I really don't want my son to pass his early old-age in such a world. If, in that context, nuclear power offers a significant contribution to the huge cuts in carbon emissions necessary to avoid

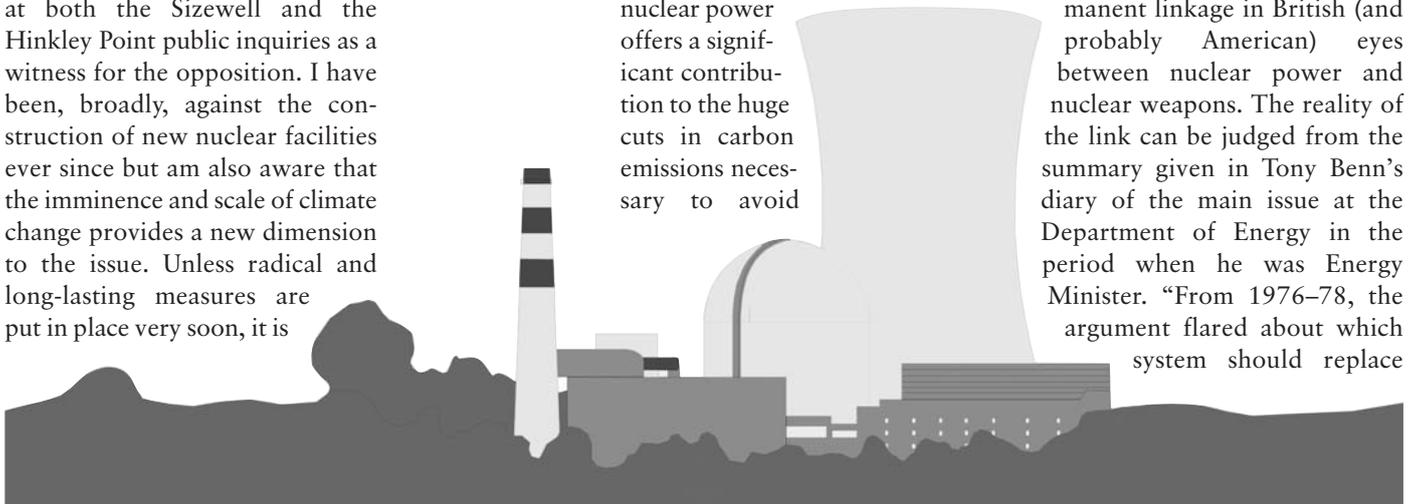
this bleak scenario without equivalent risks and without economically or politically feasible alternatives then so be it.

I want to set out what have been the four big issues concerning nuclear power and give what I see as the current situation. They include:

- Nuclear power and nuclear weapons
- Nuclear safety
- Economic factors
- Overall energy policy

NUCLEAR POWER AND NUCLEAR WEAPONS

The link between civil and military nuclear programmes has existed since the earliest days of both – a link which often has been, if not quite denied, then certainly obscured. The lie that Calder Hall was the first civil nuclear power station was put about to cover the huge resources that Britain was devoting to processing plutonium for nuclear weapons: the real purpose of Calder Hall. It led to a myth that nuclear electricity would be cheap and easy. The reality was a vastly expensive proliferation of research into various types of nuclear reactor (at one time, we funded five different types of nuclear technology, all later discarded) covered by a military-scale security blanket. This last required, for example, the creation in 1976 of a special police force run by the Atomic Energy Authority, uniquely armed and with authority to shoot to kill. The consequence of this has been a permanent linkage in British (and probably American) eyes between nuclear power and nuclear weapons. The reality of the link can be judged from the summary given in Tony Benn's diary of the main issue at the Department of Energy in the period when he was Energy Minister. "From 1976–78, the argument flared about which system should replace



NUCLEAR POWER: ISSUES

the abandoned AGRs [Advanced Gas-cooled Reactor] and the unpopular and expensive SGHWRs [Steam Generating Heavy Water Reactor]. Underlying these negotiations was the nuclear lobby's pressure, strongly supported by the Ministry of Defence, which needed plutonium, the by-product of nuclear energy generation, for its military programme, and by the Foreign Office on behalf of the US Government which also wanted plutonium for its defence requirements."

This link is neither necessary nor sufficient for either technology. Israel has become the third-largest nuclear weapons nation without developing any nuclear power capability (it uses plutonium reprocessing rather than enrichment); Canada developed a serviceable nuclear power technology without any weapons capability (the CANDU system which uses natural uranium). It is also possible to develop a highly advanced nuclear power industry without a weapons arm as in Germany. Even so, the issue of the potential linkage remains an unpleasantly active one. Iran wishes to develop a uranium enrichment facility and it has an absolute legal right to do so under the Nuclear Proliferation Treaty to which it is a signatory. Under the same treaty, it has an obligation not to take this same technology further and enrich uranium to a weapons-grade. It is asserted, and not unreasonably, that in practice, the Iranians will proceed to weapons-grade enrichment even though they may also have a parallel programme of nuclear power development.

There must be a strong likelihood that in the next fifty years there will be a nuclear conflict between one or more ... nuclear-armed countries.

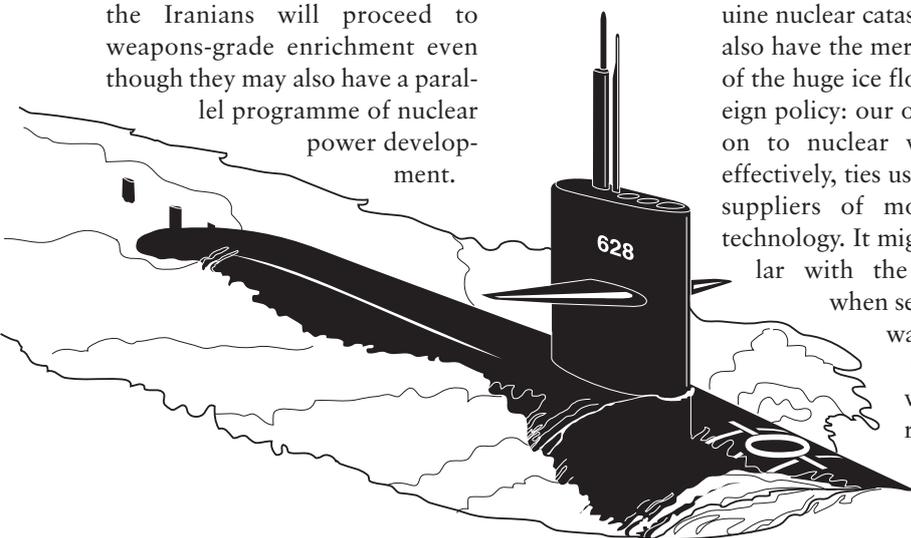
The consequence of this is that this region, stretching from Israel to India, is now the most nuclear-sensitive in the world. There must be a strong likelihood that in the next fifty years there will be a nuclear conflict between one or more of its nuclear-armed countries yet, apart from American-inspired unilateral raging against Iran, effectively nothing is being done to alter this situation. In this context, Hans Blix, the ex-UN weapons' inspector for Iraq, has put forward a novel proposal: that the entire region should agree to abandon its nuclear weapons and that in return, a UN-backed and monitored nuclear power programme should replace them. It is a novel and, in the current political climate, almost utopian proposal. It does, however, have the merit of recognising the serious scale of the issue and sets out the kind of international effort required to solve it. If not this then what? One possible thought. Suppose Britain, almost a founding member of the nuclear club, finally did the rational thing and offered to unilaterally give up its nuclear weapons? And suppose that we offered to use the resources which would otherwise go to the pointless Trident replacement to sponsoring the civil nuclear programme proposed by Blix? In other words, turn the civil/military link on its head. It might well be as utopian a gesture as Blix's proposals currently are, but it might also spark a process of change which could avert a genuine nuclear catastrophe. It would also have the merit of shifting one of the huge ice floes in British foreign policy: our obsessive clinging on to nuclear weapons which, effectively, ties us to the American suppliers of modern weapons' technology. It might also be popular with the British people when set out in a proper way.

Of course, it would also require not just the endorsement of an international

civil nuclear programme but an active involvement in it and this might be considered an unacceptable price. The point is that in Britain, the weapons/power link has been broken in any practical sense for some years. The institutions that maintained it have been largely broken up and it is perfectly feasible for either to proceed independently of the other. The legitimate fear induced by the old link still lingers on however and needs to be dispelled, one way or the other. The idea that Britain should move towards being a non-nuclear civil power whilst retaining nuclear weapons verges on the obscene.

NUCLEAR SAFETY

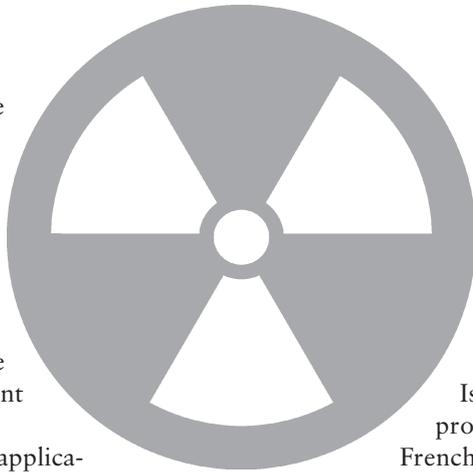
The issue of the safety of nuclear stations and their by-products is at the heart of opposition to nuclear power. The origin of these public concerns is unclear but probably arises in the course of the 1960s and 70s. Previously, civil nuclear power had been seen as a clean alternative to dirty coal but, over some years, a general reaction to the secret and authoritarian way in which it was being developed set in. In part this was a general shift towards a more sceptical attitude towards science and technology but there were also some specific reasons. One was the link with nuclear weapons discussed above; another was the appalling record of the notorious Windscale plant (now re-named Sellafield precisely because of its dreadful reputation). This had sustained a fire in 1957 which had nearly brought devastation to the surrounding countryside but whose exact scale had been concealed from the public. When Energy Minister, Benn actually learnt about this incident from Japanese scientists rather than his own staff. Windscale suffered many other problems which came to a head in the mid-1970s when it managed to leak several hundred gallons of high-level waste into the Irish Sea. It was at this time that I met a Canadian nuclear scientist with whom I had been at university. He was no anti-nuclear zealot;



his employer was the Canadian nuclear agency. However, he told me that he was giving up a secondment to Windscale and returning to Canada because he could not tolerate the dangerous environment of the plant.

In 1977, a planning application to build an nuclear oxide fuel reprocessing plant at Windscale was made which led to a year-long public inquiry, probably the turning point in public attitudes to nuclear power for, although the application was finally approved, enough was revealed to provide ample evidence for disquiet over nuclear safety. In 1979, there was a serious problem at the Three Mile Island nuclear plant in the USA, which released some radioactive gas into the environment though a major catastrophe was narrowly avoided. The last incident actually had more serious implications for civil nuclear power than the Windscale inquiry as it revealed certain design problems with the light-water reactors then becoming the standard workhorse of civil power whilst the re-processing plant at Windscale was essentially linked to an abandoned technology as well as having an intimate relationship with plutonium and the military programme. In 1984, the BBC presented *Edge of Darkness*, one of the finest television dramas ever made and possibly the final nail in the coffin of civil nuclear power in Britain in the twentieth century so far as public attitudes went. Despite its authenticity, the central plot of *Edge of Darkness* actually concerned concealed re-processing for plutonium; again it was linked to military rather than civil nuclear power.

So now, after a gap of two decades, where stands the issue of nuclear safety? Really it falls into two parts: the intrinsic operational safety of nuclear stations and the safety in storage of nuclear wastes from civil operation.



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First, the operational reliability and safety of the light-water reactors has been established. That is a rather bald assessment, but after the security evaluations following Three Mile Island and the cracking problems encountered in French reactors in the early 1990s and apparently overcome, it needs to be accepted that on any realistic safety evaluation, light-water reactors are safe. Chernobyl was an appalling event and one that caused a fully justified reaction against nuclear power. However, it was an aberration: an intrinsically unstable reactor design and a group of operators who undertook a mad operational exercise. One might guess that the most important outcome of the event from the point of view of safety would have been a re-evaluation of just how speculative operator actions could produce reactor instability and mechanisms to prevent such happening.

The second safety issue is that of the storage of nuclear power station waste, essentially the fuel rods and certain highly irradiated reactor parts after de-commissioning. The first point that needs to be made is that this problem has to be solved whether or not new stations are built. Britain has a growing stock of used fuel rods from the existing Magnox, Advanced Gas-cooled Reactor and Sizewell light-water station as well as material from the miscellaneous development reactors which still litter the country. It has to go somewhere particularly now that the various plans of thirty years ago to reprocess the rods and use the resultant plutonium in fast-breeder reactors have been abandoned. World wide, some 260,000 tonnes of fuel rods are quietly rotting in water pools, which need to be locked away, almost certainly underground. Britain is not alone in devising no accepted solution. In the USA, the proposed Yucca

Mountain repository has been given final approval in both Senate and courts but has been held up by the discovery that some of the data used to validate the site were fabricated by government scientists. In Britain, the nuclear waste agency, NIREX, had the clever wheeze of deciding that the best place for an underground store was, yes, under Sellafield. This idea was discredited at a public inquiry which was, as NIREX now agree, tarnished by the secrecy which surrounded the decision and by a general reluctance to believe anything the nuclear industry asserted to be three-times true and sworn on the bible. One good thing the Labour government did was set up a genuinely independent Committee on Radioactive Waste Management with some good people on it. This has not yet made its final recommendations but it has already made two clear points: that geological (that is deep) underground storage is the only viable option and that any decision needs to be made democratically and openly. Meanwhile, the serious ongoing work by the Swedes and Finns at their underground laboratory at Äspö near Oskarshamn in Sweden seems to be nearing some kind of conclusion with the Finns already beginning blasting tunnels for a store 500 metres down.

The central issue about nuclear storage is often obscured under a welter of technical detail. It is not so much technical as moral. It is not a great problem to envisage stores which will be safe and secure for hundreds of years in the future. The difficulty arises because of the extremely long period for which safe storage is required, tens, even hundreds of thousands of years into the future. It is effectively impossible to guarantee under extreme scenarios of human behaviour that any kind of security will not fall into decay, that even knowledge of the dangers of radioactivity will be lost. It is, of course, equally possible to envisage scenarios in which human technology will advance to the point where the disposal of

NUCLEAR POWER: ISSUES

radioactive waste will be reduced to some routine technical fix. The point, and in the end it is a moral point, is just how much weight should be given to the possibility that human life will be endangered by our current activity at future times so remote that we cannot begin to envisage them. And, as a corollary to this, just how much should nuclear waste be given some kind of special place in this moral calculus. There are, after all, other kinds of waste which will remain hazardous thousands of years into the future. An obvious example is processed asbestos, yet I could go now to a site where asbestos waste is buried just under the ground and where long-term security is non-existent. Discussion of this is largely confined to extremes. At one end is a nuclear industry which confidently talks of absolute safety and, at the other, environmental lobbies which refuse to countenance the slightest possibility that fifty thousand years down the road, a few dozen humans would be unknowingly impacted by radioactivity. It is a tough moral calculus, but is it really true that a human life that far away in time can be valued on the same scale as a hundred years hence?

The Committee on Radioactive Waste Management is clearly right to assert that any decision on nuclear waste storage must be taken democratically and openly. The problem is really the public forum in which such discussion and decision making can be undertaken. The fact that such a decision *must* be taken, irrespective of any decision on the future of nuclear power provides a potentially important test for just how democracy can operate in the twenty-first century.

NUCLEAR ECONOMICS

It will in the end come down to this: to what extent, given the over-riding priority of the dangers of climate change, does nuclear power offer the best economically-feasible way of achieving deep cuts in carbon emissions? Obviously

The choice lies between various forms of generation from renewables (wind, wave, photovoltaics etc.) and nuclear.

this depends upon the economics of alternative ways of achieving such cuts and this paper cannot go into all the complexities of such comparisons but specifically on nuclear economics there are some pertinent comments which can be made.

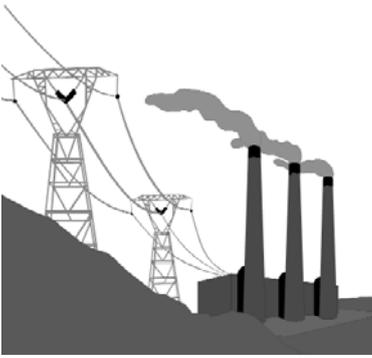
Over twenty years ago, at the public inquiry into the Sizewell station, in order to justify its application, the Central Electricity Generating Board backed by the nuclear industry presented an economic case for the plant which was so false as to be almost derisory. It was wrong in just about every aspect: capital costs, construction time, waste disposal costs and, perhaps most crucial, fossil fuel costs. As an example of the last, the Central Electricity Generating Board central estimate for coal price was that, about now, coal would cost in today's money around \$400/tonne, roughly ten times what it actually costs, and this, historically, in a period of rather high prices. My own evidence to the same Inquiry proposed forecasts that have proved to be only about treble out-turn prices. Even ignoring the other wrong forecasts, this one factor alone means that Sizewell has been a colossal white elephant built on the public purse, sold off to the private sector at a knock-down price and even then incapable of running at a profit.

So the history of nuclear economics is not good (and I have omitted the real horror story of the AGRs). Has it changed? First, one has to say that even at current oil prices, gas- or coal-fired plant have unchallenged financial advantages over nuclear. There is no real argument over this. It is only when one takes on board the impossibility of obtaining deep carbon cuts by developing more fossil-fired generation (and this includes the currently much hyped micro-CHP [combined-heat-and-power] route) that nuclear can even begin to make any sense. There are schemes to remove carbon emissions from fossil plants by sequestration

(essentially burying them in depleted gas fields) but these are totally untested and have unknown, though undoubtedly very large, costs even if they are feasible. It is also true that the costs of the reactor systems currently being touted are also very unclear. They are new only in the sense of benefiting from the engineering knowledge gained in some decades of operating the old light-water units. There has been no technical breakthrough in fundamentals nor is there likely to be one.

The choice lies between various forms of generation from renewables (wind, wave, photovoltaics etc.) and nuclear. The specific unit costs of some of the renewable systems are essentially very vague but some, notably wind power, are quite well fixed. They are more expensive than fossil units but are likely to be competitive with nuclear even when the necessarily intermittent nature of the source is taken into account. Their real problem is overall system costs: that is, the extent to which covering generation capacity is required to cover such intermittency if power blackouts are to be avoided. It is here that one can see the gaping hole which lies at the heart of the currently fashionable idea in environmental circles about the "control" which micro-generation gives over the energy consumer's life. A wind micro-generator on one's roof may give an ethically comfortable inner glow when turning on the light, but on a still summer evening, there will be much missing in the way of physical glowing unless a national grid connection is maintained and unless, somewhere on that grid, another generating unit is up and running to provide backup. Just how this gives one control over one's life frankly defeats me unless surrendering control to the elements rather than PowerGen counts.

Just how far renewables can penetrate into total system generation remains hotly contested. Much depends upon the type and scale of the renewable units and



where they are located but anything over thirty per cent seems difficult to justify. This is, of course, a much greater proportion than is currently even planned but, even so, if serious inroads into carbon emissions are to be made then an alternative source of generation does seem to be needed. The cost of supplying this from nuclear seems to be almost as unclear as it was at Sizewell apart from the fact that we know that the nuclear industry is certain to be optimistic in its estimates if not outrightly mendacious. The choice really lies between the uncertain system costs of renewable and the uncertain unit costs of nuclear. Again it would be very helpful if some real form of public debate on this issue could be managed but at the moment this is unlikely, least of all from the present government.

One factor is certain though. In the present uncertainty, the chances of the private sector building any nuclear station in Britain without government guarantees and subsidies so large and skewed as to be effectively illegal are close to zero. The current Energy Minister, one Wicks by name, seems to believe that this problem will be resolved by “carbon pricing”. He thus joins a long list of hapless politicians whose lack of knowledge about the issue is only matched by their slavish adherence to the latest fashionable line from No 10. Their names will have been forgotten by all but the specialist but dare I mention Cecil Parkinson.

OVERALL ENERGY POLICY

This clearly is a topic which can only be even summarised by a lengthy article. Here I will only summarise a summary.

The problem of expanding electricity, apart from its expense, is really whether or not the very long-term safety issue of waste storage can be resolved in any ethical way.

If one adopts, as one’s central policy aim, massive cuts in carbon emissions – and I have argued above that this is really the only ethical position possible – then there are only three broad routes which can be adopted. They can, to a degree, be mixed but some combination is absolutely required. Briefly they are: expanding the use of electricity into areas such as heating and transport which are currently the domain of fossil fuels; biofuels, primarily in transport but, in principle, also into heating as well; heavy-duty energy efficiency measures. The only general point one can make about these is that they are all going to be expensive. In the final paragraphs of this paper, I will present the problems for each. In a sense, their benefits are rather self evident.

The problem of expanding electricity, apart from its expense, is really whether or not the very long-term safety issue of waste storage can be resolved in any ethical way. It is doubtful whether the system problems of renewables can be resolved so one is always going to be forced back to the question of how base generation capacity can be supplied when the reach of electricity is being expanded. It is sometimes asserted that nuclear power will only reach a limited proportion of current emissions and is therefore irrelevant to the main problem. The fallacy in this argument is that it is based on the current generating system and on electricity forming a smaller rather than a larger part of final energy use. Which simply returns one to the policy question of what alternatives to an expansion of electricity use are on offer.

The use of biofuels is certainly one such alternative. The main problem area here, apart inevitably from cost, is the kind of monoculture expansion required to achieve any real impact. Recycling chip fat really does not go very far. Brazil is able to make significant inroads upon its oil use because it has placed huge areas of land under

sugar cane with associated water, pesticide and fertiliser use. Just how far we can go in this country to achieve an equivalent scale of impact must be in doubt.

The topic of heavy-duty energy conservation is much too great to be analysed here in any satisfactory way so I would raise only one general, though crucial, point. Energy conservation can be carried through in various ways but a broad distinction can be made between central regulatory action and individual lifestyle change. A blanket 55 mph speed limit, if imposed and enforced, would dramatically reduce transport emissions as well as saving hundreds of lives. A mass change to reduced house heating would cut fossil fuel use in homes equally dramatically. Both of these measures would be essentially costless – indeed, they would save money. So where is the barrier to their achievement? The answer is that both would require lifestyle change in a direction opposite to that of the last fifty years ever since an inalienable British right not to have to wear flannel pyjamas in bed was established. Can such changes come about? In principle, yes. In practice, ... *(here space is left for the reader to finish the sentence)*.

CONCLUSION

It should be clear that more questions are raised by this issue than can be answered. I do not mean just in a limited space or time but within the framework for democratic debate and decision-making allowed in current British society. In a number of ways, the situation for such debate is worse now than it was during the Sizewell Inquiry. Perhaps the saving grace of the crisis over climate change is that it can begin a process of democratic renewal in the way such issues are tackled. I am far from hopeful over this but it is a small silver lining on a very dark cloud.

■ *Michael Prior is an economist who has worked for 25 years as a freelance consultant in energy and environment issues.*

BETTER WATCH OUT – THERE’S A **PRO-NUCLEAR MISINFORMATION CAMPAIGN** ABOUT

Shiona Baird MSP challenges the case for nuclear.

With the election looming next year, political parties are now in full campaigning mode – and perhaps no issue is quite as topical or as hotly debated as energy.

We have already had well-orchestrated “leaks” from Whitehall revealing plans for more nuclear power stations as well as strongly worded rejections of new nuclear, most notably from government advisers the Sustainable Development Commission, as well as from the House of Commons Environment Audit Committee. On top of that is the news that decommissioning of current stations will now cost the taxpayer a staggering £70 billion and that 11 potential sites identified by Nirex for new nuclear power stations are at threat from rising sea levels.

The case for nuclear power is riddled with false claims. It is as unsustainable, uneconomic, dangerous and as toxic as ever it was, and is no solution to climate change.

Of course we need a mature, balanced public debate, informed by reliable and clear facts. This is a call made regularly by the nuclear industry – yet they regularly misinform the debate and accuse anyone questioning nuclear power as “immature”. To counter the misleading spin manufactured by the nuclear industry PR machine, we have recently launched an informative leaflet that can be downloaded from www.scottishgreens.org.uk

There are so many myths surrounding nuclear energy and energy in general that it is important for anyone entering the debate to do so with care.

MYTH NUMBER 1

Nuclear power helps stop climate change – NOT TRUE

There are much safer and more efficient ways of doing that. Nuclear power is far from carbon-

free when considering the entire life cycle of nuclear power emissions – the increasingly difficult tasks of mining and transporting uranium, the building of power stations, the decommissioning and management of waste must all be factored in. From the uranium mine to the waste dump nuclear power emits carbon dioxide pollution – and this will get worse as high-grade uranium ore becomes scarcer.

The high cost of nuclear power will divert resources from more effective solutions to the climate change problem – energy efficiency and renewables.

MYTH NUMBER 2

Nuclear currently produces half of Scotland’s energy – NOT TRUE

Nuclear power stations produce around a third of ELECTRICITY, and electricity accounts for only a fifth of the energy we actually use. Two new power stations could supply only about 7% of Scotland’s total energy needs.

MYTH NUMBER 3

We’ll be held to ransom by gas suppliers from unstable regimes – NOT TRUE

Norway is currently our main source of imported gas and the long-term aim must be to reduce dependency on fossil fuels. Nuclear power would still depend on imported uranium ore. To base our future energy supply on an increasingly scarce resource is as nonsensical as it gets, and is likely to worsen our energy crisis not solve it.

MYTH NUMBER 4

The nuclear waste problem is solved – NOT TRUE

The Government’s own advisers, the Committee on Radioactive Waste Management, have concluded that the radioactive waste problem cannot yet be “solved” – they can only recommend how best to store and manage this toxic legacy.

There are enough renewable energy resources available to provide Scotland’s electricity needs almost six times over.

Labour and Liberal Democrats are committed in their Partnership Agreement to not building any new nuclear power stations until the issue of waste is “resolved”. Greens have pushed First Minister Jack McConnell to clarify what “resolved” actually means. Recently, he has been talking of the need to resolve the “waste MANAGEMENT” issue. What he means by “management” is finding a suitable hole to dump it in.

Nuclear fantasists will claim that the new nuclear reactors will only produce a 10% increase in waste. This is hogwash. The government body that is responsible for finding a waste management “solution”, CORWM, admits that the proposed new nuclear reactors will create a three-fold increase in high-level waste and a much higher amount of radioactivity than the current generation of nuclear reactors.

MYTH NUMBER 5

The lights will go out if we don’t build new nuclear power stations – NOT TRUE

There are enough renewable energy resources available to provide Scotland’s electricity needs almost six times over. Combined with improved energy efficiency there is plenty of scope for replacing polluting forms of power as they are phased out in coming decades. Scotland’s government is failing to properly support renewable energy schemes. Scotland is home to world-leading manufacturers of wave energy devices for example, yet they have to go to Spain, Portugal and South Africa to get government support for commercial-scale projects.

Small-scale renewable energy schemes in Scotland also get a pitiful few million to support them. In Northern Ireland they are investing nearly £60 million. Nuclear power will also swallow up government funds which would be much better spent on energy efficiency and renewable energy.

FASLANE 365 – FREEING SCOTLAND OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS

MYTH NUMBER 6

Renewables are not proven technologies – NOT TRUE

Renewables such as hydro, wind, marine, biomass and solar are all proven technologies.

Ministers have said that nuclear power must make its own economic case, but they have effectively removed all liabilities from the industry, including management of its waste. It is surely vital that the whole life cycle costs of the industry are honestly calculated and made available for scrutiny by those that pay – the taxpayers.

Aside from the issues of proliferation and the risk of terrorism, plus declining finite sources of uranium, why support more nuclear power when we have the win-win option of energy efficiency and renewables? Our renewable resources are infinite and free. The power of the waves, the tide and wind combined with biomass, geothermal and photovoltaics are all there for the taking, providing continuity of supply especially if hydrogen fuel cells also play a part.

All this economic potential will be lost if investment is diverted to nuclear. If a fraction of the billions of pounds poured into the nuclear industry were re-directed towards the emerging renewables, the market would at least have a chance of developing, making Scotland, indeed the UK, a global leader. With the proposed new nuclear power stations, the fledgling renewables market is damned before it has had a real chance.

A report by ILEX energy consultants shows we could reduce CO₂ emissions through energy efficiency with a likely saving of £1 billion by 2020. What prudent economist would ignore this? With rising oil prices we will have to choose economy over profligacy. Adopting energy efficiency measures now, coupled with meaningful investment in renewables, will best prepare us for the real challenges we face.

■ *Shiona Baird MSP is Scottish Green Party speaker on energy.*

Gordon Brown recently re-ignited the nuclear weapons debate. **David Mackenzie** and **Rebecca Johnson** of Faslane 365 explain how the campaign against Trident and its successor is developing.

The government has heightened awareness of our nuclear options by trying to rush through a decision to spend upwards of £25 billion on a follow-on to Trident, which government spokespeople are required euphemistically to call “Britain’s independent nuclear deterrent”. Trident is not independent (the missiles, guidance and many warhead design features depend utterly on the United States), nor has it provably deterred anyone, least of all General Galtieri, Saddam Hussein or the July 7th bombers. What “deterred” the Soviet Union during the cold war was the fact that they had neither intention nor reason to attack us and were trying to rebuild their social and economic infrastructure after the devastation of the second world war. The nuclear arms race was not of their choosing, though they beggared their economy to keep up with America. Now the Bush administration is running its solitary arms race, but keen for Britain to give them a measure of credibility by maintaining our dependence on US military technology and keeping up appearances as a nuclear weapon state.

The Trident nuclear weapon system comprises four nuclear-powered submarines, around 58 US D5 missiles and up to 200 warheads of some 100 kilotonnes – that is, around seven Hiroshima bombs each. If no decision to disarm is made, Trident would continue to be deployed to the 2020s. The decision Blair has put on the table is whether to extend or replace them so that Britain can deploy nuclear weapons well into the second half of the 21st century. This nuclear madness and waste of resources must be stopped before it destroys us.

Faslane 365 is a grassroots campaign aimed at bringing thousands of people to participate in a year of blockades at the UK’s only nuclear submarine base at Faslane. The objective is to mobilise a broader level of public engagement to oppose Trident and prevent any commitment to further nuclear weapons. Building on the important long-term campaigning of Scottish CND, Trident Ploughshares and Faslane Peace Camp, Faslane 365’s strategy is to influence the future decision by raising the political and financial costs of deploying the current Trident system in Scotland. As we did with

FASLANE 365 – FREEING SCOTLAND OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS

cruise missiles in the 1980s, Faslane 365 will combine persistent, non-violent opposition at the site of deployment with creative actions, political pressure and wide networking.

To break a chain it is necessary to apply concerted pressure at the weakest point. Britain's decision on replacing Trident is the weakest link in the worldwide nuclear chain. If we can get one nuclear weapon state to start the process towards real disarmament, it will have far-reaching impact.

Scotland's role as the site for berthing the submarines weakens the chain even further. Time and again, Scottish and Welsh people and politicians have proved much less supportive of Britain's nuclear weapons and imperial aspirations than the English. As things currently stand, the Scottish Parliament will not be consulted about whether a new generation of nuclear weapons will be deployed on the Gare Loch, but they will be expected to find the money to support the Faslane base in all sorts of ways. Though the base provides some jobs, they are limited, as attested by the depressed state of towns nearby. Because of the base's activities and need for security, the area cannot be significantly developed for other purposes, and a number of Scottish MSPs believe this beautiful area could be revitalised if the base were closed and the local authorities were free to develop other options including leisure and sports.

Inspiring people from all walks of life to impede the operations of the submarine base and highlight the political choices will intensify the pressure on both the Scottish and UK parliaments.

NUCLEAR INSECURITY

Consider these modern security challenges identified by the European Union and United Nations: environmental degradation, climate change and depletion of agricultural or water resources; poverty, hunger, overpopulation, pandemics like AIDS or avian flu; failing states abroad and the disin-

tegration of social institutions at home; non-state armed groups and terrorists, especially if equipped with biological, nuclear or radiological weapons; organised crime, gangs, warlords; trafficking in drugs, arms, people; poorly educated and/or unemployed males (aged 15–25) combined with small arms and light weapons; and war, whether between states or internal, as in "civil war". There are overlaps between some of these categories of security challenge, but one thing is clear: nuclear weapons won't help us resolve them. They are part of the problem, not part of the solution.

Unable to come up with a convincing rationale for Britain to have nuclear weapons, the Ministry of Defence (MoD) would prefer to make as little change as possible to the status quo: an upgraded submarine, more American missiles, and perhaps some modernised, more flexible warheads, like the Pentagon's "reliable replacement warhead" or some such thing. Furthermore, if Trident is to be replaced, the MoD wants someone else to pay the bill. Already stretched by the demands of peace-enforcement in Afghanistan and military occupation in Iraq, the MoD is all too aware of the trade-offs: armoured tanks that can operate in sand, protective clothing for the troops or a few metres of a Trident submarine?

Britain's decision is shaping up to be pivotal: to accelerate nuclear proliferation for the rest of this century, or to pursue nuclear disarmament, in accordance with our obligations under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. In other words, whether the 21st century will see nuclear weapons progressively reduced and devalued, or whether Britain continues with the revaluing of nuclear weapons begun by Rumsfeld, Cheney and Bush, thereby leading to further proliferation until there is the inevitable nuclear use and war.

With public opposition to the Iraq war still high, Tony Blair and Gordon Brown have tried to pre-empt debate and responsible con-

The Faslane 365 blockades will draw attention to the illegality, insecurity and dangerous waste of resources inherent in all nuclear weapons.

sideration of the nuclear decisions. They have already committed taxpayers' money to fund upgraded facilities at Aldermaston, including a new laser and supercomputer. First Blair and then Brown have subsequently chosen to declare their own personal preferences for carrying on nuclear business as usual. These premature statements of intent are now provoking a wider debate on the rationality of replacing Trident, with even some conservative voices underscoring the expensive uselessness of weapons that increase nuclear dangers while failing to address the major security challenges identified by the European Union and United Nations, not to mention the MoD's overstretch in Iraq and Afghanistan.

CIVIL RESISTANCE AT FASLANE

However useful the debates, only concerted public mobilisation and civil resistance will have any impact on the politicians and their decisions. That's where Faslane 365 comes in.

Starting in October 2006, Faslane 365 will bring diverse groups for two days at a time to witness and impede the Faslane nuclear base and demand an end to the deployment of Trident. Already some 40 peace, justice and environmental groups from Scotland and the rest of the UK have committed to organising blockades and high visibility demonstrations, with some promising music, workshops, redecoration of the base etc.

All groups that participate in these successive blockades need to agree to a set of fundamental principles and guidelines that stress non-violence and respect for all. All will commit to the core demand that Trident be disarmed and taken out of deployment, and that the government rule out developing any new nuclear weapons and make a timetable for dismantling the existing weapons and facilities. Beyond these basic commitments, it is up to individual groups to conduct their blockades as they see fit.

The Faslane 365 blockades will draw attention to the illegality, insecurity and dangerous waste of resources inherent in all nuclear weapons. By increasing the political and financial costs of deploying the current system, we will highlight the ruinous absurdity of keeping up with the nuclear addicts. Though the actions themselves take place at Faslane, the decentralised network of mobilisation will help to promote opposition to Trident in different towns and regions of the UK and highlight our real, human security needs, which require a very different allocation of resources and action.

Faslane 365 will be kicked off on October 1st by a women's blockade linking with the persistence, determination and – ultimately – success of the Greenham women's peace camp, which started 25 years ago. Local, regional and issue-based blockades will follow, including blockades by groups from Scottish cities and rural areas and blockades co-ordinated by the Green Party, the SNP, and the Northern Quakers. Among the 25 UK parliamentarians who have given Faslane 365 their backing so far are 12 MSPs.

LEADING THE WAY TO DISARMAMENT

If Britain can be made to see sense, France will find it much harder to renew its submarines when it faces a similar decision in a few years time. Britain's choice will have tremendous impact. If we make the right one, we will become an important voice for non-proliferation and international security. For example, we will be in a stronger position to encourage more coherent efforts to build nuclear-weapon-free zones in the Middle East, where it is increasingly necessary to engage Israel as well as Iran, and South Asia, where nuclear-armed India and Pakistan threaten each other and Kashmir with annihilation. But if these small islands off the west coast of Europe decide that we need a new generation of nuclear weapons to

take us into the second half of the century, then we will signal to the rest of the world that we think nuclear weapons are indispensable – at least for “deterrence”, however slippery and unverifiable, and a seat at the top table.

If the UK advertises this view of nuclear indispensability to the world, then small wonder that further countries should seek the same. North Korea and Iran would be just the beginning, and somewhere along the line mistakes or aggression would ensure that nuclear weapons are used. Make no mistake. We are at a nuclear crossroads even more significant than the 1980s. The peace movements then led the way for civil society to achieve the breakthroughs that made possible the end of the cold war then. How much more we could achieve now!

■ *David Mackenzie and Rebecca Johnson are members of Faslane 365 Steering Group.*



Please check the website www.faslane365.org for more information. Join one of the blockades already planned and come to Faslane – or better still, choose your dates and organise your own autonomous group to highlight the priorities you think should replace Trident! Contact: info@faslane365.org

PENSION REFORM



With elderly people forecast to form an ever larger proportion of Britain's population, **David Purdy** proposes a pension system based on citizenship rather than "work"-based entitlement.

"R"etirement" in the contemporary sense – an extended period of labour force withdrawal financed by savings or deferred earnings on a scale sufficient to make paid work unnecessary – used to be the privilege of the few. Even as late as the 1960s, in many capitalist democracies "old age" was virtually synonymous with poverty. This changed in the subsequent two decades: old age incomes rose, retirement ages fell and the elimination of old age poverty lay within reach for most developed nations.

These achievements were the product of the long post-war boom and the reform of public pension schemes. Having experienced full employment and rising living standards in the 1950s, employees looked forward to something more than bare "subsistence" at the end of their working lives. This aspiration was accommodated in different ways in different countries. Sweden added a second, earnings-related tier to its basic universal state pension; UK governments fostered the growth of private occupational pension schemes to supplement the contributory flat-rate state pension established after the war. Not until 1975 was the State Earnings-Related Pension Scheme (SERPS) introduced, too late to bind the

Thanks to continued gains in life expectancy and declining fertility, the population is ageing and the ratio of retirees to employees is set to rise steeply.

middle class into a unitary state system. Such variations in policy design helped to shape voters' attitudes towards taxation and the welfare state. Throughout Western Europe and North America, however, access to retirement was democratised: retirement "wealth" was still skewed in favour of those with higher lifetime earnings, women were still disadvantaged by the sexual division of labour and a minority of pensioners still lived below the poverty line, but a far higher proportion of people than ever before enjoyed adequate and secure incomes in old age.

DOWNSHIFTING AND DE-INDUSTRIALISATION

In the decades ahead, the cost of maintaining a democratic retirement system will rise substantially. Thanks to continued gains in life expectancy and declining fertility, the population is ageing and the ratio of retirees to employees is set to rise steeply. This demographic trend is reinforced by early retirement: since 1980, employment rates among men over 55 have fallen, partly because of rising affluence and voluntary "downshifting" – opting for a lifestyle with less income and more free time – and partly because employers and governments have encouraged it: the former seeking to shed labour, raise productivity and

boost competitiveness; the latter to reduce measured unemployment by shifting the casualties of de-industrialisation on to "incapacity" benefits.

It is also important to note that the fraction of the elderly most at risk of ill health and disability – those over the age of 80 – has grown faster than the population of senior citizens in general, while the capacity of the traditional pool of unpaid caregivers – elderly wives, daughters and daughters-in-law – who provide about three quarters of all care for the frail elderly is declining as a result of rising female employment rates and the weakening of family ties. In the past, public policy has focused on income security and mainstream health care. Few countries have begun to meet the challenge of providing long-term care for the chronically ill, physically frail and mentally confused.

The key issue for the future is whether progress in democratising retirement will be undone by pressures on public budgets and the hegemony of neo-liberalism, which favours curtailing the social rights of citizens, privatising responsibility for life-risks and expanding the role of markets. The post-war pensions settlement is unlikely to be rescinded altogether, for significant pension reform cannot be achieved with-

out consensus among the relevant actors. Even the Bush administration backed down in the face of popular opposition to its plan to replace the federal, pay-as-you-go system established in 1936 by a privatised and pre-funded pension scheme.

POLITICAL INERTIA

Yet political inertia affords no grounds for complacency. In a climate where voters are tax-averse, there is a danger that the high cost of maintaining established state pension schemes will pre-empt new social programmes, particularly as the groups most at risk of impoverishment and social exclusion nowadays – lone mothers, ethnic minorities, the long-term unemployed and children, especially boys, growing up in areas of multiple deprivation – are unorganised and lack political clout. Festering social problems strengthen the hands of neo-liberals opposed to “big government” who seek to enlarge the role of private philanthropy and market forces. The challenge facing our society is to find ways of easing the fiscal straitjacket and restoring faith in government in a context where economic growth – the traditional solution to problems of material deprivation because it creates employment and boosts tax revenue – has ceased to promote personal happiness and is seriously damaging social cohesion and the natural environment.

PARTNERSHIP CRUMBLING

Meanwhile, cracks have appeared in pension systems that need to be repaired. Historically, as indicated earlier, the UK has relied on a partnership between employers and the state. Voluntary occupational and personal pension schemes buttress meagre state pensions, which are topped up for more and more pensioners by means-tested pension credits. The partnership has been crumbling as private companies cut back their pension plans, provoking charges that public sector workers are privileged by comparison. The government, for

its part, appointed a Pensions Commission, chaired by Adair (Lord) Turner, a former director of the Confederation of British Industry, to investigate ways of promoting saving for retirement. The commission considered the pension system in the round, taking into account both state and private provision, and in its first report, issued in 2004, argued that on current trends and policies, pensioners would end up poorer in relation to the rest of society by the late 2020s.

FROM DIAGNOSIS TO REMEDIES

Last November, the commission moved from diagnosis to remedies. It made four main recommendations. First, the state-pension age – already due to rise for women from 60 to 65, the current age for men, between 2010 and 2020 – should increase to 68 by 2050 in line with increasing longevity. Second, there should be a new low-cost National Pension Savings Scheme, in which workers would be automatically enrolled, but with the right to opt out. Third, if workers decide to stay in this scheme, as most are expected to do, employers should be obliged to contribute to it, with workers contributing 4% of earnings, employers 3% and the state 1%. And fourth, tax revenue should be used to enhance the basic state pension (BSP).

These proposals were generally welcomed, not least in 10 Downing Street. The response from next door, however, was cool. Gordon Brown made it clear that he disagreed with the fourth proposal. Since 1980, the BSP – a contributory, non-means-tested benefit – has been uprated each year with prices rather than earnings. The commission called for the earnings link to be restored from 2010. Since earnings rise faster than prices, this will gradually raise public spending on pensions. With no change in policy, state spending on pensioners will fall from 6.2% of GDP in 2010 to 5.9% in 2020, as women’s pension age is levelled up to that of men.

The increase in the pension age takes no account of the availability of employment and does nothing to improve the job prospects of those aged between 55 and 65.

Under the commission’s proposals, spending would rise from 6.2% of GDP to 6.3% over the same period. Thus, the rise appears large or small, depending on whether one takes 2010 or 2020 as the benchmark. (0.4% of GDP is equivalent to £5 billion in today’s money, or nearly 2p on the basic rate of income tax.)

INTEGRATED PACKAGE

Turner insisted that his proposals formed an integrated package and that restoring the earnings link, despite its cost, was vital. It sweetens the pill of a higher state-pension age and checks the spread of means testing, which tends to discourage saving. Already 40% of pensioners are eligible for pension credits; with no change in policy, the commission expects this figure to rise to 75% by 2050. If means testing is not curbed, the proposed system of private pension saving will be undermined, for middling earners will have little incentive to stay in the new scheme.

After months of sniping and haggling, a compromise was reached. In a white paper published at the end of May, the government accepted the commission’s proposals and undertook to restore the earnings link by the end of the next parliament, though this commitment is subject to affordability and will not be implemented before 2012 at the earliest. Despite the delay, the white paper offers a more coherent and far-sighted approach to pension reform than New Labour’s previous essays in this field, which allowed tactical expediency to trump long-term strategy and made an already complex system even harder to understand and administer.

There remain detailed shortcomings. The increase in the pension age takes no account of the availability of employment and does nothing to improve the job prospects of those aged between 55 and 65. It also exacerbates the statistical injustice visited on male manual workers, who are more likely to die before reaching the pension age than female and non-

PENSION REFORM

manual workers. Conversely, the white paper offers no way of ensuring that all women qualify for the full BSP beyond reducing the number of contributing years required to qualify from 39 to 30. And while the National Pension Saving Scheme is a good idea, it needs better funding. Of course, employers have complained that even 3 per cent is too much and that finding extra cash will impair investment and job creation. The answer is to raise the employers' contribution, but give them the option of contributing shares instead of cash.

CITIZEN'S PENSION

A more fundamental flaw is the government's insistence, shared by the commission, on preserving an outmoded national insurance system. The democratic left should be striving to transform the work-income nexus, the complex of unspoken conventions and formal rules that determine what activities count as "work" and how entitlement to income is established. An initial step would be to replace the contributory BSP by a tax-financed citizen's pension, payable on the same scale to all legal residents over pension age and indexed to average earnings. With senior citizens guaranteed a basic income and junior citizens covered by child benefit, the way would lie open to press for the extension of citizen's income to the population of working age. And once citizenship replaces employment as the pivot of the tax-transfer system, we shall be in a better position to build a post-materialist civilisation in which people are released from the treadmill of economic growth and acquire the capacity and desire to pursue life-projects that do not depend on ever-rising levels of private consumption.

■ *David Purdy is a social economist and former Head (now retired) of the Department of Applied Social Science at Manchester University. He lives in Stirling and is a member of the DLS National Council.*

IMPRESSIONS



Liz Marshall visited Palestine earlier this year to meet the producers of goods that are imported and sold by Hadeel in Edinburgh. Here she recounts her journeys and meetings with a beleaguered people.

I am a volunteer in Hadeel, the shop within St George's West Church, Edinburgh, which imports goods from small Palestinian producers in Gaza, the West Bank, Israel and the Lebanon. Recently I visited some of them, with a small group, the majority of whom buy directly from us to sell in other parts of Britain. It also included our contact person for olive oil, which is the only item that we do not import directly from Palestine.

The week was spent staying in Jerusalem and Bethlehem and travelling around the West Bank and Israel. Gaza was closed, which was a disappointment for some of us but worst for Heather who imports the olive oil to London. A storage container which had been paid for, and without which the olive oil would be ruined, could not get through. Heather stayed on after we left. She had an

appointment at the British Consulate, hoping that they would put pressure on Israel to release it.

We visited fourteen centres which ranged from a woman's home, with the workers based in the house, to a large organisation providing child care and a health clinic. Embroidery is a traditional skill and quite often it is done at home with supervision. We saw workshops equipped to make beautiful objects from the olive wood which provides much-needed work for men. There were two centres catering for disabled people: "Oasis" where those with mental impairments recycle paper into lovely hand-made and decorated cards as well as many varieties of candles, and "Lifegate" where physically disabled young adults have their medical problems carefully assessed and then are trained in skills most likely to offer some work in their own area. They

OF PALESTINE

have staff and equipment to help the trainees achieve their maximum mental and physical potential. Because of the difficulties with travel the Director is trying to set up residential care again – they had to do this during the intifada.

The groups with most problems seem to be those near to Hebron. Their villages have lost land and have become poorer and more isolated. One old-established but primitive Muslim village was suffering harassment from the Israeli settlement above them and was being protected by Peace Corps people. There was despair wherever we went about the “Wall”, as it continues to grow. In Bethlehem, the Wall, together with the Israeli settlements, which also keep increasing, will eventually completely enclose the city. A campaign called Open Bethlehem has been launched to draw international attention to the imprisonment of the city. We stayed in a large comfortable modern hotel, the only residents and the only tourists visiting the Nativity Church.

Travelling anywhere is difficult in the West Bank; permits issued by the Israeli Government are always necessary. Roads and checkpoints are opened and closed by the Israeli military without warning. I experienced roads made for settlers, courtesy of the Church of Scotland minister, who took some of us in his car with Diplomatic number plates, as well as those used by the Palestinians and quickly became aware why their journeys on poorer roads took so much longer. Cars had to queue at all the checkpoints. On foot, the crossings from Jerusalem into Ramallah and from Jerusalem into Bethlehem are really difficult, and, in the dark, very hazardous, even for the able bodied. The sad thing is that distances are short. One woman who lives in Bethlehem has travelled for twenty six years to work in the Church of Scotland guest house, a journey which once took twenty minutes

Travelling anywhere is difficult in the West Bank; permits issued by the Israeli Government are always necessary. Roads and checkpoints are opened and closed by the Israeli military without warning.

and can now take more than two hours. Permits are required to go to Israel, including Jerusalem, for Palestinians, and Palestinians living in Jerusalem need permits to come to Palestine. There is not a proper post office in Palestine so mail has to be sent through an agent. adding to the cost, and posted in Israel. In the Hebron area there were difficulties even getting to the agent, or to obtain materials as the roads in were often closed.

Hadeel buys from an olive oil and soap producer in Israel which is helping Palestinian farmers. We learned from the Jewish woman in charge that the farmers are losing more and more of their land and, to make matters worse, last year’s harvest was poor. The future is indeed bleak and young people especially are leaving Palestine if they are able to do so. However we saw much to make us feel that it was so worthwhile to continue to help the communities that we visited. Hadeel is linked to a charity called Palcrafts through which the shop can make small grants to the centres, in addition to buying their goods.

We experienced pleasure and generous hospitality everywhere that we went and came home with a renewed drive to let others know what is happening to a small land under military occupation. Sadly

the situation has deteriorated since my visit in mid February. The decision of both the European Union and the USA to stop funding the Palestinian Authority has meant that Government employees have not been paid for more than two months. Tension has risen between Hamas, the new governing party, and Fatah, the party of the President, particularly in Gaza, where the economic situation is at crisis point with very few goods getting in and hardly anything getting out.

A young man from Gaza whom I met thought that Hamas should make “a few small steps” to recognise Israel. Perhaps accept the 1948 Mandate? On our trip we met a newly-elected member of Hamas at an Arab Women’s Centre in Bethlehem. She was a university lecturer and her husband was in prison. She had three demands of the Israeli Government: an end to military occupation, freedom to travel including to be able to go to pray in East Jerusalem, and freedom for political prisoners. One can only hope that some negotiations can start soon to allow the Palestinians some basic rights and some hope for the future.

■ *Liz Marshall is a member of Democratic Left Scotland.*

Since Liz’s visit, a deaf centre in Gaza which supplies pottery among other goods has been bombed. Some trainees were injured.



BRITAIN'S DEMOCRATIC CRISIS

With British politics seemingly trapped in a malaise of cynicism and increasing lack of involvement, **Ray Newton** charts a radical path for renewal.

THE PROBLEM

The recognised research authority, *Parliamentary Affairs* (January 2006), begins "Over the past decade considerable concerns have been raised about the health of parliamentary democracy in the UK ... and increasing levels of public mistrust and cynicism ..." Why?

David Marquand (*New Statesman*, 16th January 2006) expressed the problem succinctly. "For New Labour as for old Labour, it is proceeding inexorably and ineluctably towards a known and unchanging goal. Individualism, consumerism, capitalism and globalisation are the wave of the future and it is pointless to resist them. The only remaining task is to help society to adapt to them ... but ... statist determinism stultifies the imagination, narrows the room for debate, impoverishes political language and closes off alternate futures. Necessity trumps morality; in Blair's chilling phrase, "What counts is what works". The focus group becomes a substitute for civic engagement, media manipulation for a national conversation. Yet this whole approach is now in crisis." At present, political parties and candidates concentrate on whether or not there are votes for the next election and concern themselves with swing voters in marginal constituencies. Therefore, we need to dig deeper and make far-reaching changes if we are to reconnect the public with politics.

TOWARDS A SOLUTION

The task now is how to counter the claim by Blairites and Cameronites that "there is no alternative!" There is an alternative – a new, radical, participatory, democratic system of institutions and government with a renewed struggle against laissez-faire economics. We should aim instead for the values of co-operation and need rather than individualism and greed. Citizen contributions must not merely be encouraged but valued and incorporated into the system. It is ironic, therefore, that the Scottish Civic Forum has just had its official funding stopped! More than ever, it seems to me, we must all turn to what is best in our long-term enlightened self-interest. Why? This is not a soft option. We are talking about human survival. Man is now a major ecological determinant resulting in climate change, depletion of resources, a widening gap between rich and poor and increasing instability and migratory pressures. The present system of a liberal capitalist democracy is unsustainable and threatens rich and poor alike.

We are proud in Scotland at having been at the frontiers of the Enlightenment, making possible the subsequent tremendous progress in human affairs but the

If we are to reduce the deep feelings of disconnection from the political process nothing less than a New Enlightenment is needed.

study of politics is not always rational, universal, and individual and the present "liberal" democratic thinking is based on an erroneous analysis of the human condition. If we are to reduce the deep feelings of disconnection from the political process nothing less than a New Enlightenment is needed. This opens up new possibilities and moves us forward from "old Labour" and "old Marxism". The important aspect is that we can all have a different but valid point of view, such as what kind of proportional representation (PR), civic participation, the degree of subsidiarity, whether or not there should be a written constitution, transparency and power sharing, control of the media, tighter inheritance laws, fiscal autonomy and accountability, checks and balances, the royal prerogative and the established church. But clearly, this must start from the bottom rather than just the top with its reliance on media polls, three-line whips and majority voting. How much can the electorate be involved in what many conceive as being too complicated for the layman?

HOW ARE WE TO MOVE FORWARD?

Rethinking our place in the world is not easy and the human condition is full of contradictions. Take nothing for granted, beware of token reforms aimed to shelve the real. Question motives, look for hidden agendas and reject dogmatism and sectarianism. Yes, hard choices have to be made and authority respected but this does not excuse the present failure to politicise the public. For example, millions read the *News of the World* which asserted that 54% of the electorate believed that Brown would dodge buying a round of drinks, while only 21% thought that Cameron would do so. This is typical of the "political education" received by voters. Let us then challenge the dumbing-down media and short-termism in the political system. It is essential to counter the current cosying up by New Labour to those with wealth, power and privilege by trusting what people say at grass-roots level even if this is not expertly articulated, and then generate public debate and mass movements for change.

The fundamental point is this. Antagonism cannot be removed from living together. If this is so then the machinery of democratic institutions must recognise its permanence. Current politics seems unable to grasp the irreducible character of this basic premise. The lack of forward thinking results in impotence, confusion, and opting out of politics at a time of momentous uncertainty and profound changes in how we are compelled to look at the local, national and global situation. In effect, we have to change from our authori-

tarian two-party system in the Western democracies with its official opposition party playing the same game of mud-slinging. This system is no longer capable of satisfying the demands of the twenty-first century. The problem has been sprung at us now because the Cold War made it opaque by the diversion of attention and effort into the two great political camps.

We, in Scotland, are not isolated from the problem even though we enjoy a better political culture. There is no doubt that our Parliament is a vast improvement on the antiquated system of Westminster but, on reflection, is it radical enough in practice? Have we allowed it to fit in too snugly with Westminster? Is it too much the servant of a free-market economy? Are we really involving more people, especially the young? What seems not to be realised is that an opponent should not be there to be defeated or excluded but should be recognised as an adversary whose existence is legitimate and must therefore be tolerated with dialogue and respect. PR helps in this regard. At the same time we have got to recognise that strong forces are ranged against the will of the people and therefore these must be exposed and opposed. If we continue to abandon the ideological struggle for social and democratic justice it could have devastating consequences for the future but, with the imminent demise of Tony Blair, we have an opportunity for new thinking and inspired activity.

Neal Lawson of Compass has stated that the recommendations of the recent commission chaired by Dame Helena Kennedy show that “democracy is in a more perilous state than any of our politicians comprehend.” The commission’s proposals include proportional representation, public money to political parties, citizen rights to initiate new laws, assemblies and inquiries and a reformed elected second chamber. There are other suggestions such as changing the macho culture of the political machine, reducing the voting age, placing ballot boxes in supermarkets and so on but, in general, our politicians are in denial that

The existence of permanent creative tensions between the many and various identities should be the basis of a new settlement.

there is any crisis in our model of a liberal democracy. Many of them say that they would not be able to carry their electorates with them so they follow the media agenda instead. Democracy at home also depends on an ethical foreign policy with arms control, a strengthened UN with a reformed Security Council, a tax on aviation fuel, the regulation of international money markets, fair trade not “free” trade with subsidised farm products, and, most importantly, resisting instead of reinforcing American domination.

CONCLUSION

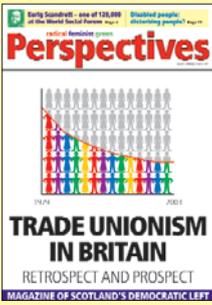
Now, in today’s world of uncertainty, we cannot avoid facing the problem of reconnecting people and politics in a truly democratic system. The existence of permanent creative tensions between the many and various identities should be the basis of a new settlement. Why not call, for instance, for a federal system with an English Parliament in Birmingham with a second chamber of representatives of organisations but having mainly advisory powers, PR by the single transferable vote, and a UK parliament of parties with free voting and a cross-party cabinet that elects the Prime Minister instead of the other way round? Would not a truly federal system liberate our politics from its handcuffs? So let’s start in Scotland with the hard work of putting our own house in order with an open debate on a new agenda. Why not begin with the Power Commission’s proposals to set the ball rolling but allowing our imagination, realism and enthusiasm to push ahead much further. I have a great respect for the hard work put in by our politicians but this debate will separate the progressives from the careerists. Only then will we be able to choose. Politics is much more than parties and personalities!

■ *Ray Newton is a member of Democratic Left Scotland and Compass and has been a political activist for over 50 years.*

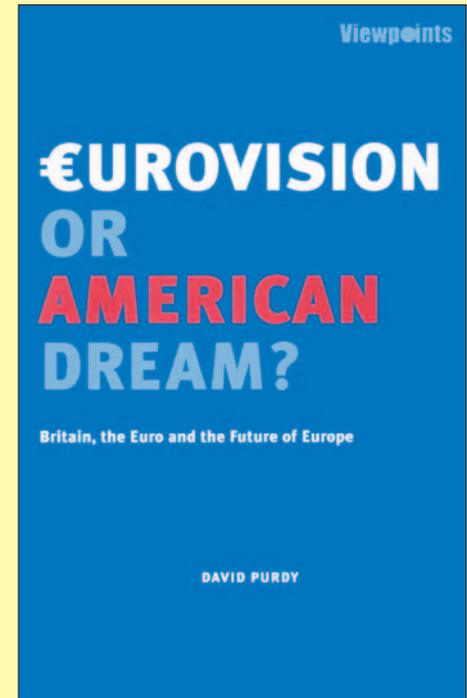
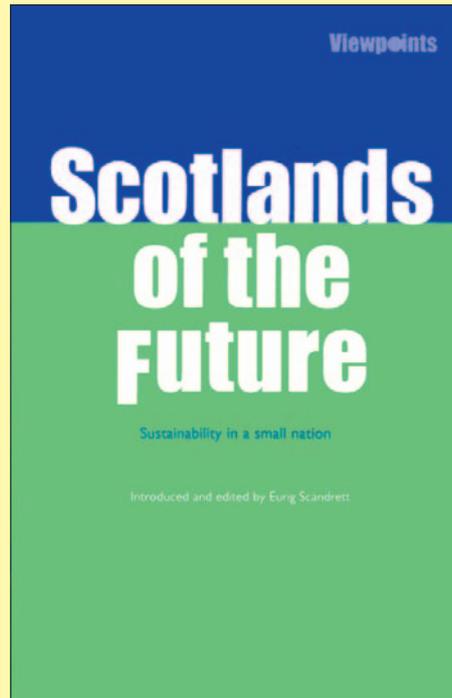
The image shows a screenshot of the website www.democricleftscotland.org.uk. The page features the following content:

- Header:** democratic left scotland, radical - feminist - green
- Navigation:** Home, Publications, Perspectives, Events
- Text:** "There's more to Politics than Parties. Dis exists to promote a dialogue, alliances and activity between social movements, trade unions, progressive parties and committed individuals to obtain the maximum pressure to renew Scottish democracy with equality of opportunity for all."
- Section: our vision**
 - We want to see a society which
 - Meets the basic needs of all, and enables them to develop their talents and abilities to the full, enriching society and themselves.
 - is free from oppression and exploitation. A world where children are nurtured, nourished and respected, and which values and cares for its older citizens.
 - is pluralist, valuing people from different backgrounds and cultures, celebrating their rich diversity.
 - Ensures that its development is ecologically sustainable and takes responsibility for bequeathing a healthier environment to future generations.
 - Contributes to the creation of a new global community of co-operation and interdependence which leaves behind poverty, famine, debt, militarism and war.
 - But there are those with power, wealth and privilege organised to resist our demands so the key to success is **united action.**
- Join us today** (with a downward arrow)
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 - Tel. 01382 819 441
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