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radical feminist green

# Perspectives

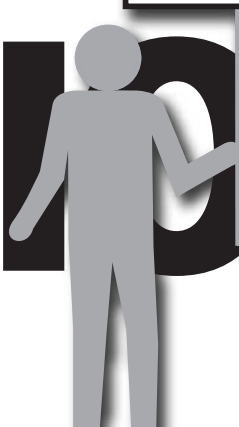
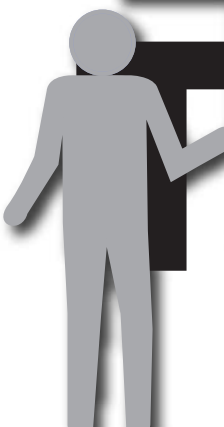
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# SCOTLAND

**THE END  
IS NIGH!**

# AND

**NO IT'S  
NOT!**



# THE UNION

# OF

# 1707

**MAGAZINE OF SCOTLAND'S DEMOCRATIC LEFT**

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## EDITORIAL

# LEFT AND RIGHT, SCOTS AND WELSH

As we noted in the last issue of *Perspectives*, 2007 was a hugely symbolic year for the SNP to become the Scottish government, 300 years after the Act of Union. Again in this issue we explore the impact of 1707, with historian Ewen A. Cameron examining various interpretations of the history of Scotland since the Union. While he makes the point that historians are “notoriously bad at peering into the future,” he nonetheless underlines the conclusion of his piece by arguing that “Whatever happens to the Union it is vital that we do not fabricate a sense of denial about deep-seated and long-standing Scottish enthusiasm for it.”

Moving up to date, Willy Maley presents an analysis of the work of a major contributor to contemporary Scots literary culture, Irvine Welsh, concentrating particularly on his short stories, which best illustrate the unconventional radicalism which permeates his work. This is contrasted particularly with another great Scots writer, James Kelman, whose work, Willy argues, is succeeded and usurped by Welsh, who offers “a more subtle challenge to the state and the status quo than the more conventional radicalism represented by Kelman.”

Continuing with part two of the series on key words, David Purdy



examines the concepts of left and right. In a continuing period of pessimism for many on the left, this article helps to map out some of the ground that needs to be gained to tilt the balance away from the currently dominant and pervasive neo-liberal political discourse.

Returning to last year’s Scottish parliament elections, we lamented the decline of the smaller parties. The Scottish Greens saw their representation cut from six to two MSPs. However, the adoption of multiple member wards and STV in the council elections on the same day saw the Greens take seats in both Glasgow and Edinburgh. Maggie Chapman, who now represents Edinburgh’s Leith Walk ward, reflects on the role of councils as agents for change.

Adam Ramsay examines the phenomenon of the BNP’s rise in the 2006 English council elections, a rise that stalled the following year. He points out that mainstream politicians should react to the BNP in a way that undermines them rather than playing to their agenda.

In a post-seasonal contribution, Maggie Lunan writes about ALTERnativity, a project against consumer Christmas. Lastly, a diary contribution from “The Hat” lifts the lid on the problem of birthday party guest lists.

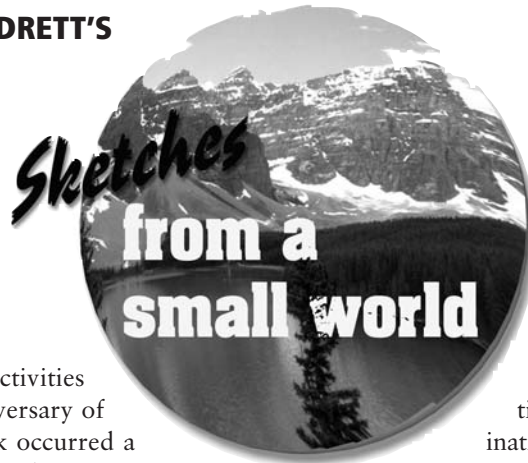
■ **Letters and contributions (which we may edit) are welcome and should be sent to the editor – contact details alongside.**



[www.democraticleftscotland.org.uk](http://www.democraticleftscotland.org.uk)



## EURIG SCANDRETT'S



I have just been participating in activities to commemorate the 23rd anniversary of the gas leak in Bhopal. The leak occurred a little after midnight on 3rd December 1984. It remains the world's biggest single industrial environmental disaster, killed 20,000 people and left 100,000 with ill health from the effects of the gas or the subsequent contaminated water.

The gas leak was caused by progressive and systematic application of capitalist economic logic. The factory was built by US multinational Union Carbide to produce pesticides for the Green Revolution, which was concentrating agriculture into the hands of the large landowners and the agricultural corporations. Operated at arm's length by an Indian subsidiary with controlling share ownership, it was a sister factory to one in Virginia, USA – with a number of key differences. The Bhopal factory was made with cheaper materials, used unskilled labour above mechanisation, and cut corners in the processes.

When it was upgraded to store methyl isocyanate (MIC), the state government granted permission despite it being too near to the railway station. As profits from pesticides started to level out, cuts were made in maintenance, staff training, inspections and safety precautions. A series of accidents and gas leaks preceded the 3rd December. On that night, water penetrated a corroded valve and started an exothermic reaction, which bypassed safety controls which had been deliberately cut back, were malfunctioning or inadequate or simply switched off. 40 tonnes of MIC leaked into the surrounding bastis where the poor of Bhopal lived.

To date, nobody from Union Carbide, or Dow Chemicals which it merged with in 2001, has been held responsible. Dow is currently operating a charm offensive to take advantage of India's embrace of neo-liberalism. Throughout India, special economic zones are being established to encourage inward investment from foreign capital. State governments from the Communist Party of India (Marxist) in West Bengal to Bharat Janata Party in Gujarat have been competing to collaborate with the neo-liberal project. Dow has recently announced the development of a chemical hub in Gujarat.

I'm in Bhopal to set up a project to document the survivors who have campaigned for justice all these years. Survivors' stories have been told many times, but mostly as victims. Victims of the gas leak, victims

**Many Bhopal survivors have been active campaigners, participants in creating a movement for justice to challenge the corporatisation of India.**

of poverty, victims of bureaucratic corruption and medical neglect and ongoing contamination and corporate criminality. But at the same time, many survivors have been active campaigners, participants in creating a movement for justice to challenge the corporatisation of India. In the face of an alliance of global corporate capital and vested interests of state violence, this movement of poor, sick and largely illiterate people has sustained a campaign for 23 years for justice, corporate accountability, health-care, rehabilitation and human dignity.

■ *Eurig Scandrett is a Green activist and member of Democratic Left Scotland.*



# There's more to politics than parties



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## 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.

## Who can join Democratic Left Scotland?

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.

**Democratic Left Scotland**  
**na Deamocrataich Chli an Alba**



# WHEN WILL IT ALL END? SCOTLAND AND THE UNION OF 1707

Whatever happens to the Union of England and Scotland in the future, historian **Ewen A Cameron** believes it essential that “we do not fabricate a sense of denial about deep-seated and long-standing Scottish enthusiasm for it.”

The earl of Seafield’s remark from 1707 – “There’s ane end to ane auld sang” – is well known. Indeed, Scottish independence, ended in a constitutional sense with the Union, was “ane auld sang”. It was not, however, a simple one. Scotland’s constitutional position had been altered by the Union of the Crowns in 1603. This was followed by several attempts by James VI and I to complete with an incorporating arrangement. These attempts foundered on the rock of English reluctance to get too close to the Scots. What James failed to achieve by politics, Cromwell managed by unambiguous military power and from 1651 to 1660 Scotland and England were incorporated and ruled by a unicameral legislature in London. The Restoration of 1660 and the Revolution of 1689, especially the latter which released the potential of the Scottish parliament, produced further changes in the relationship between Scotland and England.

## PRELUDE TO ABOLITION

Finally, the Scottish parliament’s period of assertiveness was the prelude, perhaps the cause, of its

abolition. Similarly, the history of the Union since 1707 has not been as straightforward as those who celebrate it as an unbroken tradition often assume. The new United Kingdom which was created in 1707 was augmented in 1801 with the addition of the Island of Ireland after the abolition of the parliament in Dublin, an institution which had also had a late and possibly fatal flowering. In 1922, after over a century of mutually unhappy relations, Ireland was partitioned and only six of the thirty-two counties remained as part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Nevertheless, in its various incarnations, the Union itself is now an “auld sang” and its melody may be more difficult to forget than is often assumed.

Historians, however, should generally eschew the temptation of gazing into the future: the past has sufficient complexities. These include the difficulty of assessing such issues as the importance of the Union to the last three hundred years of Scottish history, or asking what we mean when we talk about “the Union”, or make remarks about “Unionists”. It is clear that “the Union” is more than

**In some important areas of modern Scottish history the Union can only be forced onto centre stage by gross manipulation.**

the constitutional arrangements put in place in 1707. Indeed, in some formulations “the Union” is a shorthand description of Scottish history since 1707. Scotland’s constitutional position has only been one of a range of important features of modern Scottish history, and probably not the most important in explaining the trajectory of the nation. Even in political history an emphasis on the constitutional question will only produce a partial picture. In some important areas of modern Scottish history the Union can only be forced onto centre stage by gross manipulation.

## RAPID DEVELOPMENT

Scotland’s economic development, exceedingly rapid in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, is only put down to the political arrangements of 1707 by the most one-dimensional supporters of the perpetuation of the Union. Indeed, for much of the first century after 1707 Scotland did not seem a likely candidate for the rapid development which ensued. Strange as it may seem, given what we know of later history, Ireland seemed a more likely candidate for prosperity in the modern world of commerce and industry. Dublin, more than any Scottish city, was the second city of the Empire in the eighteenth century. Glasgow’s prominence was to come in the nineteenth century as a result of prodigious economic growth.

In an undergraduate list of “reasons” for the pattern of modern Scottish economic history geology, geography and topography ought

## SCOTLAND AND THE UNION OF 1707

to feature as prominently as constitutional arrangements. Nationalists are also sometimes simplistic in their assertion that the Union is the primary reason for Scotland's economic difficulties in the period since 1914. There has also been a similarly reductionist view of Scotland's intellectual flowering in the eighteenth century: how was it that a poverty stricken country with a dark theocratic past could produce such an outburst of genius? For some the simplistic answer has been the contacts provided by the new political arrangement of 1707. More recent scholarship has presented a different picture of both economic and cultural development in the eighteenth century. This emphasises the extent to which the roots of change in the eighteenth century were embedded in the foundations of Scotland in the seventeenth century: its education system, contacts with Europe, advances in science, its agriculture and environment. Whether one agrees with these views or not, it is sensible to recognise that there is a version of Scottish history which does not emphasise the agency of the Union of 1707.

Of course, there is an equally distorted view of Scottish history which argues that the contours of our modern history can be attributed to engrained features of Scottish society which pre-date the Union of 1707 and the independence of which were supposedly guaranteed by its provisions. Chief among these are the holy trinity of the Presbyterian established church, the parochial system of education and the legal system based on Roman principles. These, especially the first two are the foundation of a complacent, but persistent, view of Scottish history. This emphasises a protestant, male and subtly elitist version of the Scottish past which elides the contribution of women and immigrants and passes quietly over the groups which may have been victims of the celebrated march of progress and prosperity. This com-

placency was celebrated in the Kailyard literature of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Mostly written by Presbyterian clergymen it presented an image – albeit a highly popular one – of small town Scotland, untouched by industry or symbols of modernity like the railway. This was not, of course, the sum total of Scottish cultural endeavour in the period, but it was suggestive. Herein lie the roots of a prominent Scottish myth, extensively deconstructed by sociologists in recent years, but still at the forefront of the popular imagination: Scotland as an inherently democratic and egalitarian place. Access to education was singularly open. Indeed, in the Edwardian imagination the image of the son of the laird and the ploughman seated in the same school and enduring corporal punishment by the same tawse was a powerful one. Those, like the Victorian eccentric classicist and controversialist John Stuart Blackie, who chose to differ and argued that the Scottish education system, especially the Universities, were verging on a national joke compared to European, especially German, models, had to shout long and hard to make their point of view known.

One of the best known works to emerge from the Scottish universities in the twentieth century, *The Democratic Intellect* by the late George E. Davie, has been taken up by politicians, most of whom don't seem to have read it, as a defence of this popular idealisation of the classless empowerment of the Scottish university system. This selective reading of Scotland's educational history leaves much out – the subordinate place of women and girls, the patchy geographic coverage, the controversies over state provision of secondary education, the effective social exclusivity of many of the best schools in the public sector. These problems persisted in the twentieth century and many of their subtle effects are captured in the novels of Robin Jenkins who continually returned to the antithesis of the

**It is sensible to recognise that there is a version of Scottish history which does not emphasise the agency of the Union of 1707.**

kailyard, the difficulties encountered by intellectually able but poor children faced with the social challenges of academic education in Scotland. Other critics have argued that the achievements of the Scottish system have been rather narrow. The acquisition of empirical knowledge was emphasised at the expense of sceptical and critical thinking.

A recent development in our understanding of the Union has been the attention paid to Scotland's role in the British Empire. Scottish access to imperial opportunities was part of the attraction for those who supported the Union in 1707. Despite the signs of confidence evident in the establishment of the Bank of Scotland in 1695 and the ambition – ultimately disastrous – which led to the disaster at Darien, the Scottish economy was in a parlous state and the famines of the late 1690s had seen food shortage and death stalk the land. In this context, and the possible value of illicit trades notwithstanding, the attractions of the Empire, especially the riches on offer in India, were an important consideration in a cash-strapped economy.

### **“BRITISH” ARISTOCRACY**

The Empire was also an important source of place and patronage for a wide section of Scottish society below the aristocratic elite with purchase in London. We can debate Britishness endlessly but the one unambiguously “British” group was the aristocracy: far more than the working class they have been reluctant to recognise national boundaries in their identity. The Empire is important, however, as it can help Scots to reach an understanding of their history which helps to undermine another element of complacency.

There is sometimes a tendency to wallow in victimhood and to flaunt the scars inflicted by a supposed history of oppression. This is difficult to sustain. Scots were involved in every arena of the British Empire and in every aspect

of its history: slavery, economic exploitation, colonisation, brutal military repression. Although the Scots may not have been especially egregious in this regard, neither were they especially noted for their humanitarianism. John Mackenzie, the minister of lands in the Liberal governments in New Zealand in the late nineteenth century, may have emerged from the eastern highlands of Scotland during the clearances, but that did not give him any empathy for the Maori whose land rights were eroded by his land reforms. Another prominent New Zealand Prime Minister, Peter Fraser, emerged from the working-class political culture of the western lowlands of Scotland.

#### **SOURCE OF WEALTH**

If there is a theme which brings together the activities of Scots in the Empire it is a willingness to see the Empire as a source of wealth. The activities of William Jardine and James Matheson in the opium trade and the development of Hong Kong are fairly well known. Even in Singapore, where prominent statuary and luxury hotels commemorate that most quintessentially English figure Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles, the Scots lurked in the background. His predecessor, William Farquhar, born in Kincardineshire in 1774, is perhaps not the best example of imperial success as his failings in the matter of land allocation induced the hostility which led to his dismissal by Raffles. His successor, John Crawford, an Islay man born in 1783, was a classic example of the Scot in the Empire. He was devoted to the idea of Singapore as a centre of free trade and low taxation. It was Crawford who undertook the delicate political negotiations with local interests which ultimately saw the East India Company acquire control over the whole island.

Many diverse examples of Scottish imperial activity can be found and we should be wary of stereotypes, either of the benevolent or rapacious Scot. The

Empire, however, further demonstrates the paradoxes at the heart of the Union: nothing better symbolised Britishness, but it provided an ideal arena for Scots to express their national identity without conforming to an anglo-centric model.

One conception of the Union is that it is a partnership between Scotland and England. It is a little odd that this element of Scottish history has not been much emphasised. Much effort has been expended on comparing Scottish history with that of Ireland. Much less attention has been devoted to the Anglo-Scottish relationship. A recent book on the subject, published by the British Academy no less, ended up saying very little on the subject of the relationship between Scotland and England and more about the relationship between Scotland and the British state, the centre of power of which is located in England of course. Freud, referring specifically to Scotland and England, referred to the “narcissism of small differences”. If Scotland is not quite an additional county of England there are more similarities and links than many are prepared to contemplate.

#### **MASSIVE MOVEMENT OF PEOPLE**

There has been massive movement of people, in both directions, between Scotland and England. The English in Scotland and the Scots in England have integrated more seamlessly than any other minority in either host society. There have been outbursts of Scotophobia – we are perhaps enduring one at the moment, and Gordon Brown is not the first Scottish Prime Minister to induce this reaction, although his Presbyterianism and Edinburgh, rather than Oxbridge, degrees distinguish him from his predecessors – but they have not proved to be a central feature of the Anglo-Scottish relationship, and the same can be said for Anglophobia in Scotland. Scotland bears a greater degree of similarity to England

**Scots were involved in every arena of the British Empire and in every aspect of its history: slavery, economic exploitation, colonisation, brutal military repression.**

than any other comparator. Although this may be a partial product of the Union it would not be quickly altered by further constitutional change. Indeed, if Scotland's eighteenth and nineteenth century history cannot be entirely explained by reference to the Union, the latter has increasingly left its impression on the twentieth century – the Welfare State might be an even greater symbol of the Union than the British Empire.

Much of the writing about the Union in the twentieth century has been pessimistic and has sought reasons for its apparently likely demise: an event which, inconveniently, has not yet taken place. Despite devolution, perhaps even despite the advent of an SNP administration in Holyrood, this may be the wrong question. It is the longevity, rather than the fragility, of the Anglo-Scottish Union which requires explanation. This is not to say that the Union may not founder in the future, perhaps even the near future. Historians are notoriously bad at peering into the future, but one can confidently predict the outbreak of a fierce debate between those who argue that the inherent features of the Union sowed the seeds of its destruction over a long period; and others who argue that the sundering of the Union can be found in the consequences of the political divergence between Scotland and England, despite the socio-economic similarities of their electorates, in the period since 1979. The latter argument, for which there might be very strong evidence, would at least obviate the need to entirely rewrite, or rewish, three hundred years of Scottish history. Whatever happens to the Union it is vital that we do not fabricate a sense of denial about deep-seated and long-standing Scottish enthusiasm for it.

■ *Ewen A. Cameron is senior lecturer in Scottish history at the University of Edinburgh.*

# SMASHING THE CISTERN: THE ACID TEST OF IRVINE WELSH'S SHORT STORIES

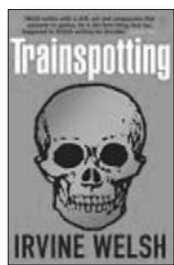
**Willy Maley** argues that it is Irvine Welsh's short stories that best illustrate the unconventional radicalism that permeates his writing.

Irvine Welsh made his name as a merciless chronicler of Edinburgh's underside. Welsh's novels have attracted most critical attention, but aspects of the shorter fiction go beyond the scope of the novel. Welsh's strengths as a writer lie in spiky vignettes and swift explosive scenes. *Trainspotting* itself is a loosely connected sequence of short stories stitched together, not just by common characters, but by a common language, a patchwork quilt of colloquialisms, criss-crossed by catch phrase, cliché, and cursing. Its acceptance as a novel, despite its many voices and broken form, is due to a new "postmodern" sensibility that no longer looks to the novel as a reassuring site of unity and cohesion. Though it could be argued that the figure of Mark Renton acts as an anchor in *Trainspotting*, a breakdown of narrative perspectives in the novel reveals the extent to which Welsh disperses viewpoints and voices.

## SCOTLANDS VERSUS SCOTLAND

Welsh established himself initially through small publishing ventures such as Rebel Inc (later a major imprint of Canongate) and Clocktower Press (recently anthologised by Jonathan Cape), though it could be argued that he launched them as much as they launched him. These fringe ventures afforded Welsh the freedom to explore the fanzine format at which he

**The new fiction is concerned with the proliferation of "Scotlands", plural and diverse.**



now excels, characterised by cartoon violence, endlessly inventive sloganeering, and increasingly intricate typographical experimentation. If the "bittiness" of Welsh's writing, its episodic quality, is due in part to its origins in the pamphlet culture of small presses, it can also be seen to reflect the actual fragmentation of the culture at large. Where an earlier literature might have perceived its aim as inventing or proclaiming "Scotland" in the singular, and a more recent writing may have regarded its mission as debunking the myths of an idealised Scotland, the new fiction is concerned with the proliferation of "Scotlands", plural and diverse.

The short stories from his first collection, *The Acid House* (1994), reveal the depths and lengths to which Welsh is willing to go in order to ground his texts in the multiple realities and fantasies of Scottish culture. Welsh's writing is remarkably rich in verbal texture. Its author's commitment to a vibrant oral culture rather than to any specific political project or party makes it hard to see it as subversive in any conventional sense. In its twenty-one short stories and closing novella, *The Acid House* can be seen to be mapping a linguistic and geographical domain hitherto disregarded or disenfranchised.

The civic and social specificity of Welsh's shorter fiction undermines the claims to inclusiveness

of larger narratives of nation and empire, and sets up counter-narratives of regional dissent. Welsh's style – sampling, streetwise, synthesising – is implicitly anti-colonial. Welsh is more inclined than his predecessors to sift through the junk and pulp of Scottish culture, hence his cult status. Welsh's influences, or effluences, range across contemporary film, music and television rather than resting on the canon. He excels at that potent blend of the excremental and existential, "keech and Kierkegaard", that is all the rage in new Scottish writing, a social surrealism that takes its cue from cinema and dance as much as literature. The pop video, the club, and the fanzine are its archives. It is this openness to the most basic elements of society, as well as its most commodified culture, that marks Welsh out from James Kelman, rather than the endorsement of the myth of individualism, which both writers share. They also share a contempt for the conventional, conforming, and collaborationist working class, who appear as "draftpaks", "schemies", or "straight pegs" in Welsh's work, and are characterised by one of Kelman's protagonists in *The Busconductor Hines* as "a bunch of bastarn imbeciles" (p.180).

## THE VANQUISHED

Prolific, polemical and provocative, Welsh has staked his place at the forefront of the new wave of Scottish writers. Famously labeled "the poet laureate of the chemical generation", his appeal is much broader than the drug and youth culture he depicts so trenchantly. The devil is in the detail, and in the vitality of the local idioms, but there are big issues at stake too: cruelty, revenge, cycles of violence, crime and punishment, responsibility and guilt. Like Zola, Welsh is on the side of the vanquished, and arguably to a greater extent than his contemporaries and predecessors in a Scottish context. The social realist tradition stood in the way of the downtrodden, representing them without lending an



ear and giving voice. A moralistic and patronising approach to representations of the working class has also been present in Marxist thought. Leon Trotsky railed against scurrilous speech, seeing it as a product of oppression rather than a means of resistance: “Abusive language and swearing are a legacy of slavery, humiliation, and disrespect for human dignity – one’s own and that of other people”. Trotsky went so far as to argue for the imposition of fines upon those who swore in factories. The new Scottish writers not only fly – or fart – in the face of this old Left response to scurrility, but also refuse to be confined within the factory gates, gates that are in any case closed to the unconventional working class characters who people their fiction. That those same factory gates are increasingly closed to their own workers is a contributory factor in the shift from “workerist” fiction to a literature of unemployment.

#### COMMITMENT

Duncan McLean spoke of new Scottish writing precisely in terms of a commitment to voice: “a commitment to the voice as the basis of literary art, rather than some supposed canonical ‘officially approved’ language.” Welsh is engaged in this kind of commitment as distinct from political activism as it is conventionally perceived. Of course, Kelman is also committed to voice, but there is, on his part and that of his characters, a residual commitment of a more orthodox nature to individual morality. Welsh is more linguistically subversive, more in touch with the contemporary moment, and he takes us down a step lower on the social ladder, to the bottom rung, in fact. Sometimes he takes the ladder away altogether, suggesting immobility and entrapment at the lowest levels of society.

Welsh’s subjects are marginal or fringe figures, migrant and vagrant. Like the “Eurotrash” of the story that bears that title, they are not part of any mainstream movement, but elements of a sub-



**Critics have noted the ways in which Welsh attacks both Romantic Scotland and Radical Scotland, kailyard and Clydeside.**

culture who move within an informal economy, surviving by stealing and stealth. The users and abusers who inhabit his fiction are not the proletariat as traditionally conceived, nor can they be dismissed as lumpen or as an underclass. Rather, because they defy easy categorisation, and upset accepted notions of who is radical, and who repressed, Welsh’s characters are best described as “subaltern”, a term whose original meaning, “next in line”, is entirely appropriate since Welsh, as Kelman’s successor and usurper, takes his cue from the back of the queue.

Critics have noted the ways in which Welsh attacks both Romantic Scotland and Radical Scotland, kailyard and Clydeside. Where Kelman writes grittily and wittily of Glasgow, Welsh’s narratives harness the apathy and abjection of his native Edinburgh, specifically the outlying “schemes” of Leith, Muirhouse, Pilton and Wester Hailes. A rhetoric of resistance yields to a grammar of the grotesque, a magic and tragic realism that can strike the reader as surreal. Welsh’s language is in some ways even more uncompromising than Kelman’s, his character’s consciousnesses more disordered. The kind of language a pejorative criticism would call “strong” or “bad” is a familiar feature, the use of Scots making fewer concessions to the reader brought up on a diet of standard English. But where in Kelman there is minimal violence in terms of grammar and lexis – a bit of backfronting (placing “but” at the end of a sentence), a few phonetic transcriptions, some fucking insertion – Welsh goes to town on the tongue, taking liberties and risks along the way. Where Kelman is a writer of commitment and integrity, Welsh is an author of anarchy and disintegration.

One example will suffice to indicate a key difference between the two writers in terms of individuality and morality. In *How Late It Was, How Late* (1994), published the same year as *The Acid House*,

the bold and blind Sammy senses that drug addicts – “junkies” – are hanging around beside the elevator in his block of flats. They present a threat to him, these “fucking junky fucking shooting-up bastards” (p.156). Sammy shares the dominant culture’s fear and loathing of addicts. This is the same Sammy who later cautions his son, who has alluded to “darkies”, against using racist epithets: “All I’m saying son if people dont want ye to call them a name, ye shouldnay call them it” (p.345). There is a question here of political consistency and hypocrisy. Such unthinking antipathies, authorial intrusions and professions of political correctness are rare in Welsh’s work. Where “respect” in the literature of commitment might have meant respect for one’s self, or for one’s elders or betters, boiling down to deference, in the context of the new writing it means respect for other cultures, in other words, difference. In Kelman’s novel, we follow Sammy’s progress and share his perspective: that of a man who survives with integrity. Welsh’s writing lurks with the “junkies”, rather than loiters with the disaffected, such as the fundamentally decent and humane Sammy.

#### STRONG MORAL STANCE

In “A Smart Cunt”, the nerve-jangling novella that brings the curtain down on *The Acid House*, two young drug users rob and kill a blind man. The story is told through the eyes of one of the assailants, Brian, and sets out to place the violence and intolerance he feels in several contexts – familial, social, vocational, national, and political. The reader of Welsh’s fiction is carried along with the perpetrators, until the lines blur, and it slowly dawns that behind every perpetrator is a victim. It’s a strong moral stance that seeks to understand rather than condemn, and to comprehend first and foremost by entering the world and words of the individual and their community. Welsh’s immersion in the idiom

## IRVINE WELSH

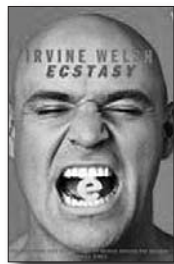
and outlook of his characters is similar to Kelman's, but the crucial difference lies in the absence of a moral centre and of a controlling consciousness. Renton is clearly the key figure in *Trainspotting*, but other characters are given a fair hearing, something lacking in Kelman's fiction. Where Kelman can be seen to keep in place a distinction between the good working class individual – conscientious, progressive, resistant – and the bad guys who hover on the periphery – addicts, hedonists, time-servers – Welsh champions not only the socially excluded but the politically inarticulate and even the morally reprehensible. Which is not to say that he is amoral, merely that his subjects are not the deliberately dissenting individuals that a certain radical criticism finds it all too easy to countenance and indeed support, but a less palatable rabble whose unspeakable hatred and violence is shown to have a source and a referent, an objective correlative, in the shape of a complacent political culture.

Critics who see Welsh's writing as a product of the logic of late capitalism, a symptom of capitalist decay, or just another commodity in a postmodern culture that shelves resistance, fail to take seriously his revolution in language, and his sense of outrage at injustice. Welsh gives us a constructive moral address within apparently hopeless situations. The difference is that his characters do not have to be good or sorry to earn our respect. According to Kelman: "Good art is usually dissent; I want to be involved in creating good art". "Good art" and "dissent" go hand-in-pocket for Kelman, but for Irvine Welsh, as for Mae West, goodness has nothing to do with it.

### A TALE OF TWO CITIES

Welsh, like Kelman, directs his anger and energies at authorities and bureaucracies, but it is less a question of the individual versus the state – an opposition that can always come down to a bourgeois tautology – but more a matter of

**Critics who see Welsh's writing as a product of the logic of late capitalism, a symptom of capitalist decay... fail to take seriously his revolution in language, and his sense of outrage at injustice.**



exposing the extent to which institutions and communities are structured by the very forces they seek to exclude. In *The Acid House* there is a tale of two cities and two cultures that takes as its premise a social encounter between two professors in Glasgow's West End. "The Two Philosophers" features Lou Ornstein, an American Professor of Metaphysics at Edinburgh University, and Gus McGlone, Professor of Moral Philosophy at Glasgow University. The Conservative McGlone is a bourgeois Glaswegian from a wealthy suburb, while Ornstein is a working-class Chicago Jew. Ornstein believes in the inexplicable and the unexpected, what he terms "unknown science". As a reconstructed Marxist he clings to the possibility of social change, and a belief in a future emancipation, though less through the working class organised as the ruling class than by way of some unforeseen departure in rationality. McGlone holds firmly to the facts, and is a hardened "refutenik".

### LOGIC VERSUS MAGIC

On this particular day, ensconced in a university bar, they lament the fact that their conversation always turns inevitably to logic versus magic. They decide to test their differing theories of knowledge and reality in a less "intellectual" location, or at least one far removed from the informed eavesdropping of colleagues and students. Seeking a spot closer to reality, they take the subway south of the river to a rough neighbourhood where they enter a notoriously tough bar with the intention of airing their ideas within earshot of an unschooled audience, and thus establishing once and for all who has the clearest arguments in lay terms. They concede that this will prove nothing beyond the clarity and precision of their competing rhetorics, but it will provide some sport – more than they bargained for, it transpires.

In the event, they locate a pair of elderly men playing dominoes, and

decide to impose themselves on one patron who "seemed to have a view on everything" (p.114). The two philosophers order drinks, commandeer a table, and commence their set-piece quarrel. Ornstein rehearses his familiar argument about the limits of existing scientific wisdom; McGlone holds firmly to his line of Popperian provability and soon, surrounded by a crowd, they have takers on either side whilst the argument becomes increasingly heated. Unbeknown to them, a posse of young soccer supporters is tuning in to their discourse. Eventually, one of the football fans has had enough: enough of fighting talk that never comes to blows, and enough of what is obviously a patronising effort to let the proletariat judge a patrician feud. The youth is especially angry at the pair of intellectuals for treating a friend of his father's "like a fuckin monkey". McGlone's protests are silenced with a sneer and he is told that the only way to resolve this dispute is by way of a "squerr go", a roundtable discussion having failed to deliver a clear verdict.

The youth orders the two professors to go outside and settle their differences there man to man. The Scot is somewhat reluctant to see conceptual frisson translated into kerbside fisticuffs. Conversely, Ornstein, recalling an undergraduate slight on McGlone's part, is willing to comply with subaltern ethics, and so they step out into the sun. The two philosophers are taken to a deserted car park behind a nearby shopping centre. McGlone again demurs, but Ornstein starts boxing clever and McGlone is soon bested, the fight ending with the memorable line: "The Chicago materialist, urged on by the crowd, put the boot into the prostrate classical liberal" (p.115). The police intervene, and both brawling scholars are apprehended. McGlone tries to assert himself during questioning. By contrast, Ornstein is tactful and polite, and so gets off scot-free. The Glasgow police, predictably enough, mani-

fest more sympathy for the amiable American than they do his supercilious and objectionable counterpart. The result is that McGlone is detained on a charge of breach of the peace (and roughed up a little for good measure). As he leaves the police station and heads for the subway, Ornstein is spotted by one of the young men from the bar who witnessed the earlier altercation:

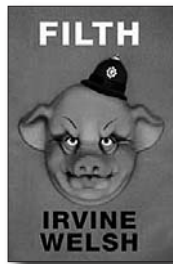
– Ah saw you fightin this efternin, big man. Ye were magic, so ye wir.

– No, Ornstein replied, – I was unknown science (p.117).

### **LATENT VIOLENCE MANIFEST**

We have come a long way for the sake of this joke, but it has revealed the hypocrisy of McGlone's posturing in the furnace of the very factuality to which he has so often had recourse. This little story engages with class, culture and varieties of violence, literal and linguistic, as well as with different ways of knowing. It makes manifest the latent violence and hierarchical structure of academic debate and exposes what was carefully hidden in the academic institution, namely aggression and exclusivity. The entrenched resistance to Irvine Welsh within the Scottish establishment can be read in terms of the kind of macho posturing that "The Two Philosophers" locates within an apparently civil intellectual discourse. It is less a question of the Scottish version of native inferiorism – the famous "cultural cringe" – than of blatant social snobbery. This tale lays bare the connection between fictional strategies and situations of discrimination and exclusion. It is appropriate that the last word goes to an "outsider", an American, a Jew, and an Edinburgh-based academic. Welsh's love affair with American culture, antipathy towards Glasgow, and sympathy for the underdog, not to mention his rigorous class politics, makes him the scourge of Gus McGlone.

As this story indicates, Welsh's treatment of politics, sexuality, and



**Welsh's characters seldom have recourse to officially sanctioned forms of political resistance ... Instead, they practise a subtle and pervasive guerilla warfare, blocking rather than tackling its moral agents and servants of power.**

violence, is utterly uncompromising, or, rather, it is completely compromising in its capitulation to the brutal realities arising from cultures of poverty and despair. Where others might gloss over and editorialise the meaner aspects of society, Welsh deals with them directly in a manner so cool and dispassionate as to seem cold and distant. In interviews he is quick to rebut any claims that he revels in violence. Instead, he argues that his writing shows things as they are, not as he would like them to be. As with most writing that cuts across the popular/cerebral divide, there are inevitably readers who are on a package holiday to hell as well as those who live there, natives and tourists. Welsh is aware of his mixed readership, and in an interview in the *Big Issue* he maintained that the film version of *The Acid House*, which he scripted himself, would be more disturbing than *Trainspotting*: "It will be more inaccessible, more hard-core. The accents will be harder, so spoiled middle-class brats who want to shop around for their next cultural fix will find it more impenetrable. And those lazy, wanky critics who don't quite get it can f\*\*k off – it was nothing to do with them in the first place." The problem is that the two constituencies Welsh wants to turn his back on – "spoiled middle-class brats" and "lazy, wanky critics" – are often one and the same. Moreover, his hybrid style, with its highs and lows, acts as a magnet for those he wishes to ward off. Far from repelling such readers by proliferating profanity or intensifying idiolect Welsh is likely to win new readers of the same type. After all, if one wants to live vicariously then the lower the language the better. The lure of a "cultural fix" is too great for those addicted to tickling the underbelly to be put off by more of the same.

### **GUERRILLA WARFARE**

Welsh's world of failures and consumers is marked by pessimism, but also, paradoxically, by a realist mode more acute and accurate

than the old stereotypes of masculine workerism and principled opposition we find in the fiction of, say, William McIllvanney. Welsh's characters seldom have recourse to officially sanctioned forms of political resistance, or even wildcat actions such as strikes or sit-ins. Instead, they practise a subtle and pervasive guerilla warfare, blocking rather than tackling its moral agents and servants of power. Let me end with arguably Welsh's most explicitly political tale, "A Blockage in the System", one of his most effective realist narratives, an absurdist, anarchist, obstructionist account of recalcitrant plumbers caught between two bosses and two local authorities, the siren call of a card game that represents a triumph of leisure time and social desire over the work ethic. "A Blockage in the System" is a piece of straight realist fiction in which a group of city council plumbers debate whether or not to tackle a job that involves a blockage at a block of flats, whose source may be internal, in which case it is their province, or external, in which case it comes under the jurisdiction of the regional authority. Again, as with many of Welsh's stories, there is an old joke at the heart of it: "Well, as one anarchist plumber sais tae the other: smash the cistern" (p.78). Paradoxically, the blockage is outside the system: "Wir talkin about an ooutside joab here. Defo" (p.79). But it is also inside the system, insofar as the plumbers themselves block the attempts of their boss to have them investigate it. In refusing to get their hands dirty and showing a clean pair of heels, the workers draw on the existing division of labour within local government, and their own rich rhetorical reserves, in order to defy the state. This is an important story because it sums up a kind of politics of refusal, of blockage, of hoarding, a cultivated indolence that impedes the progress of the system, chokes its passage. In terms of class and the cause of labour, to be obstructive, in this context, is constructive. What we

## IRVINE WELSH

have here is a highly localised conflict that will never go as far as an industrial tribunal, or even involve the union, since it is a matter of the boss disregarding the professional advice of his workers. The narrator remarks: “Whit’s it the gadge thit took us fir the ONC at Telford College sais? The maist important skill in any trade is accurate problem diagnosis. Ah goat a fuckin distinction, ah pointed at masel” (p.81). The workers who quibble on the source of the blockage are themselves the blockage.

### SUBTLE CHALLENGE

The phrase “accurate problem diagnosis” may be allowed to stand as the final demand of Welsh’s writing. As with all subversives, there is a risk that the poet laureate of the chemical generation will not fulfil his end of the bargain, will sell out, welsh on the deal. There are already signs of a backlash. But Welsh’s writing arguably offers a more subtle challenge to the state and the status quo than the more conventional radicalism represented by Kelman. Welsh’s writing forms part of an emerging literature of abuse. Where an earlier culture would have blamed the victims and tried to teach them a new language, the new generation of writers are exploring, on their own terms, and in their own voices, the violence and values of subaltern states. True subversion transforms both form and content and, for Welsh, language itself has to be turned over in order for subversion to take place. Welsh’s writing is multiple and marginal, in this manner, rather than singular and central. It may not be “radical” in hackneyed, stereotypical or dogmatic ways, but it does undermine unity and authority in its use of voices, in its mixing of forms, genres, modes, and registers, and in its plumbing of depths that require a plunger and rubber gloves.

■ *Willy Maley is professor of renaissance studies at the University of Glasgow and has published widely on modern Scottish culture.*

# A NEW VIEW FROM LOCAL GOVERNMENT

The Scottish Greens lost seats in last May’s Scottish Parliament elections, but gained new councillors in Glasgow and Edinburgh. **Maggie Chapman** reflects on future challenges.

When I was elected an Edinburgh councillor last May many of my friends wondered what I would do as a member of a local authority. One even suggested that I’d be much better getting the qualification and actually becoming a social worker. I was, though, quite excited by the opportunities for change that lay ahead.

Local government shapes much of the way in which we live our lives. It has massive possibilities for change, and I hope to be able to harness those opportunities while I’m the councillor for Leith Walk.

One of the most significant ways that a council can change the way in which a city is run is through the relationship between the local authority and third sector organisations. There is a massive opportunity to release the potential of Scottish civil society if councils choose to realise it. By a variety of mechanisms, it will be possible to reinforce the social economy to improve Scottish society. From reducing reoffending to tackling climate change, communities and community organisations are the often forgotten force that offers real opportunities for change.

Local authorities can maximise this change by focusing on the third sector and adapting the way in which they support voluntary organisations and the way they devise and award contracts. For instance, many contracts offered by local authorities are bundled in such a way that small organisations find it impossible to bid to supply these services. This means that if a contract to supply social care has an element of catering in it as well, only an organisation capable of providing both services can bid for the contract.

Similarly, many voluntary organisations need support in pump priming and organisational development. Rather than allowing these organisations to follow the funding available, local authorities should follow a more strategic approach to growing the third sector.

A good, if rare, example of this was the decision by City of Edinburgh Council to give Edinburgh Community Food Initiative a grant to buy delivery vans that allowed it to bid for the “Fruit in Schools” funding. Without the grant, ECFI would have been unable to bid for the contract, which would have gone to a private sector organisation. The additional value offered by the voluntary sector also shines through in this instance, as ECFI delivered workshops for children offering basic education on food.

Other measures, such as offering full recompense for the service provided (Full Cost Recovery) and automatic five year funding agreements will provide the sector with the support that it needs to deliver not only basic services, but the sort of additional value I have highlighted above.

I see the role of Greens in local authorities as not only providing good community-based councillors, but also ensuring that councils make the best use of their massive resources to help communities and to make Scotland a more socially and environmentally just place.

■ *Maggie Chapman is one of the first Green councillors in Scotland, representing Leith Walk ward in Edinburgh. The Greens have eight local councillors in all – three in Edinburgh and five in Glasgow.*

# KEYWORDS:

# LEFT AND RIGHT

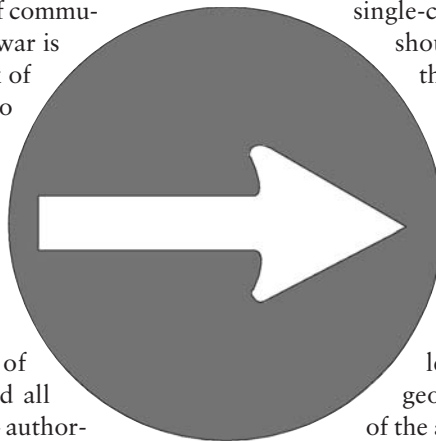
Continuing our series of articles which critically examines words and their meanings – and their role in the struggle for a better society – **David Purdy** carefully looks both ways: *left* and *right*.

In *Perspectives 15*, we launched a new series examining keywords in modern political discourse. In this issue, we consider the distinction between left and right, which have been at war with each other for the past two hundred years. Since the collapse of communism, the view has gained ground that the war is over. In what follows, drawing on the work of the Italian political thinker, Norberto Bobbio (1996), I contest this view and argue that while not all political conflict pits left against right, the distinction continues to mark a deep ethical and philosophical divide.

## ECHOES OF THE MARSEILLAISE

All human societies experience conflict – of interest, value, opinion or judgment – and all have political arrangements to deal with it – authoritarian or democratic, as the case may be. Political conflict is typically bipolar: protagonists tend to divide into two opposing sides, just as in war – “the continuation of politics by other means” – participants are either friend or foe, if only because my enemy’s enemy is my friend and my enemy’s friend is my enemy. War leaves no room for neutral third parties except as intermediaries seeking to end hostilities. Indeed, the archetypal form of warfare is the duel: the old form of *bellum*, the Latin word for war, was *duellum*; and Clausewitz begins his classic treatise on war by defining it as “a duel on an extensive scale”.

Bipolar conflict has always existed: think of plebeian versus patrician, parliament versus crown, Whig versus Tory or Hanoverian versus Jacobite. But the terms left and right did not enter the vocabulary of politics until the early years of the French Revolution. Meeting in an amphitheatre, members of the Constituent Assembly sat on the left, right or centre, as viewed from the president’s chair, according to their views on the great constitutional questions before them: the scope of the royal veto, the structure



**Ideas, programmes and parties may be left-wing at one time and right-wing at another.**

of the legislature, the powers of the executive, the independence of the judiciary and the extent of the franchise. The left, led by the Jacobins, sought to abolish the royal veto and hereditary privilege; favoured a single-chamber legislature; insisted that all power should rest with the elected assembly, including the appointment of judges and the power to quash judicial decisions; and called for “one man, one vote”, (women being excluded from full citizenship). There were groups further to the left who demanded absolute day-to-day control over the government and challenged the Jacobin tendency towards dictatorial centralisation. But both the left and the extreme left were more or less united in their struggle against the bourgeois liberals and the Girondins, who approved of the anti-monarchical and anti-aristocratic aspects of the revolution, but were strongly opposed to popular sovereignty.

The words “left” and “right” may be used in three main ways: descriptively, to summarise the two sides in a conflict; evaluatively, to express a positive or negative judgment on one side or the other; and interpretatively, to mark a shift in the balance of political forces or a passage from one phase to another in the life of the nation. The terms are, of course, antithetical: one cannot be on both left and right at the same time. And they have opposite signs: to commend one is to condemn the other. Nevertheless, the difference between them is relative, not absolute: ideas, programmes and parties may be left-wing at one time and right-wing at another. Until the mid-nineteenth century, for example, the political left in Europe was primarily concerned with issues of civil freedom, parliamentary reform and national liberation. But as liberal demands were achieved without disturbing the prevailing class structure, the mantle of the left passed to socialists and anarchists, hitherto minority sects, who argued that the ideals of 1789 could not be realised within the framework of bourgeois democra-

## KEYWORDS: LEFT AND RIGHT

cy, but would require radical changes in the ownership of property, the organisation of the economy and the distribution of life-chances. Thus, the entire political spectrum shifted to the left: a distinct right and centre continued to exist, but they were now defined by virtue of their opposition to the socialist movement, which rapidly overshadowed its anarchist siblings and henceforth formed the core of the left, notwithstanding the later schism between Soviet communism and social democracy.

### RADICAL RIGHT, CONSERVATIVE LEFT

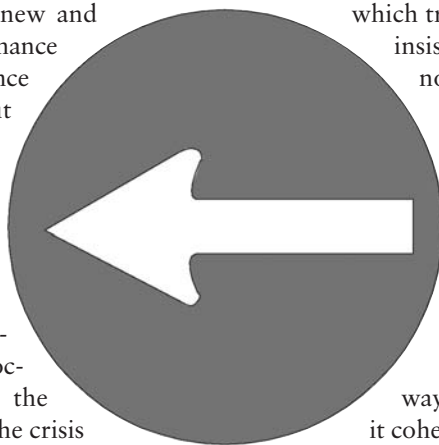
The left-right distinction is not the only spatial metaphor in politics: we speak of frontbench and backbench, centre and periphery or top-down and bottom-up, not to mention base and superstructure. We also use various temporal metaphors: radical/conservative, innovative/traditionalist, forward-looking/backward-looking, progressive/reactionary and idealist/realist. Until the 1970s, these contrasting pairs largely aligned with the left-right axis: the left stood for radical social transformation, the reduction of social inequality and progress towards a new and better world; the right stood for the maintenance of the existing order, the defence or acceptance of social hierarchy and scepticism about ambitious schemes for social improvement; the centre stood somewhere in between these poles and since it claimed to be neither left nor right, its whole existence and *raison d'être* depended on the underlying antithesis.

The collapse of the post-war social settlement, the demise of Keynesian social democracy and the rise of neo-liberalism as the polestar of politics changed all that. From the crisis of the 1970s it was the free-market right that emerged as the radical, dynamic, modern and forward-looking force, particularly in Britain and the US, while the left was pushed into a conservative, hidebound and backward-looking stance. This historic reversal of roles ushered in a period of defeat for the left in Western Europe, North America and the Antipodes, which the collapse of communism in 1989–91 only intensified and from which it has still not recovered. Indeed, it has become a commonplace of contemporary politics that the division between left and right is irrelevant to the problems and conflicts of the world in which we now live.

### CHALLENGES TO THE LEFT-RIGHT DISTINCTION

One version of this general claim is the end-of-history thesis propounded by Francis Fukuyama (1992), who argued that the big questions about how society should be organised and governed had finally been settled by the victory of democratic capitalism over the other main contenders for world supremacy: fascism and communism. With ideological conflict now at an end, politics would henceforth revolve around problems rather than positions. Leaving aside the

**The defeated left has an obvious interest in disguising its weakness, while the victorious right has every reason to propagate the view that there is no alternative to the way things are.**



emergence of Islamic radicalism and the so-called war on terror, the chief problem with this view is that it has all been said before: the end of ideology was confidently proclaimed by Daniel Bell and others in the late 1960s, just as the advanced capitalist countries were about to be rocked by a whirlwind of social dissent, economic crisis and political radicalism. Ideology, it seems, springs eternal.

A different argument for saying that politics is no longer polarised between left and right is that the old ideologies have no solutions to contemporary problems. Neither the minimum state of the free market right nor the big state of the collectivist left is capable of tackling new sources of social exclusion and poverty such as failed education, family breakdown and deviant lifestyles, of rehabilitating offenders and repairing collapsed communities, or of building new forms of transnational governance to combat climate change and regulate the global marketplace. The best-known exponent of this view in Britain is Anthony Giddens. In a series of books beginning with *Beyond Left and Right* (1994), he has argued for a “third way” which transcends the old dichotomy. This is not, he

insists, a mere exercise in triangulation, but a novel synthesis, which incorporates elements of both left and right and gives them a fresh significance. The general approach is encapsulated in New Labour soundbites such as “economic efficiency and social justice”, “tough on crime and tough on the causes of crime”, “no rights without responsibilities”, “work for those who can, security for those cannot”; and so on.

Unlike the end-of-history thesis, the “third way” does not disclaim ideological status. But is it coherent and effective? Can we really make sense of the world and engage with it to some purpose if we discard the distinction between left and right or relegate it to the second rank of importance? After all, capitalism remains an unstable, unjust and undemocratic economic system that continues to degrade our habitat, deform our society and diminish the human spirit. Moreover, these various harms are generated by mechanisms that are intrinsic to the system. Hence, as the left has maintained for the past 150 years, the central problem of politics is still how to mitigate and counter the harm that capitalism does and, in the long run, to transform and transcend it.

Of course, the precise manner in which capitalism functions and the specific problems it throws up vary from one culture and epoch to another. Thus, as times change, political movements must adapt their programmes, priorities, methods and styles or risk becoming obsolete. No party, for example, can afford to ignore the increased salience of resource depletion and environmental pollution since the 1970s. It does not follow, however, that the categories of left and right are redundant. On the contrary, the left-right split is reproduced within the Green movement: there is a green, pro-capitalist right and a green, anti-capi-

talist left. The same goes for feminism and the other social movements that came to prominence in the late 1960s and 1970s, and for nationalist parties like the SNP, which seek to secede from an established state.

This is not to deny that after almost thirty years of neo-liberal hegemony, the left is very much weaker than the right. But as Bobbio suggests, the very dominance of the right helps to explain why so many people now believe that the war between left and right is over. The defeated left has an obvious interest in disguising its weakness, while the victorious right has every reason to propagate the view that there is no alternative to the way things are.

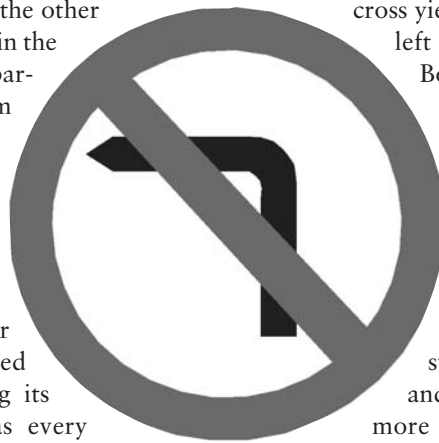
### THE BASIS OF THE DISTINCTION

Despite this conspiracy of silence, the left-right distinction survives, not just in everyday speech, but at a deeper philosophical level. As we have seen, the rise of neo-liberalism reversed the roles of left and right on the temporal plane of politics. But attitudes towards social equality still form a basic dimension of political space. Equality is, of course, a relationship between two or more entities. Hence, whenever the word is used, three questions necessarily arise: Equality of what or in what respects? Between or among whom? And on what basis? The left is sometimes accused of wanting to equalise the distribution of absolutely everything among all human beings everywhere as an end in itself. This is a caricature. By the same token, no political movement can avoid having some view on the three questions about equality.

What really divides left from right are their respective attitudes towards the origins and consequences of human inequalities and the possibility of overcoming them. Roughly speaking, the left believes that although some inequalities result from natural conditions, most are the product of social arrangements; that the consequences of inequalities for both individuals and society as a whole are largely harmful; and that while the scope for reducing them is constrained by the need to avoid compromising other values such as liberty and democracy, in general the pursuit of equality is both highly desirable and far more feasible than its opponents allow. On each of these counts, the right takes the opposite view: that human inequalities are largely natural; that their consequences are broadly beneficial; and that attempts to overcome them are either futile or pernicious.

### THE SHORT TWENTIETH CENTURY

Important though it is, the horizontal division between left and right is not sufficient to explain the pattern of political conflict since the French Revolution. Political space also contains a vertical dimension along which movements can be placed according to their attachment to personal liberty and their commitment to democratic norms. The resulting



**To describe an ideal society is by no means to be committed to imposing one's ideal on everyone else, regardless of whether they agree.**

cross yields four basic categories: liberal-democratic left and right, and authoritarian left and right.

Bobbio uses the words “moderate” and “extreme”, but this terminology elides the distinction between ends and means: there is no inconsistency in supporting what are conventionally regarded as “extreme” policies while eschewing the use of authoritarian methods and respecting democratic norms. Admittedly, the further to the left one stands relative to the prevailing consensus about how much of what kinds of equality and inequality the good society contains, the more difficult it is to influence current policy through the democratic process. But to describe an ideal society is by no means to be committed to imposing one's ideal on everyone else, regardless of whether they agree.

Suitably relabelled, Bobbio's categories offer a useful guide to the political history of the last century. At the authoritarian end of the vertical axis – on left and right, respectively – stand communism and fascism. At the opposite end, ranging from left to right, are social democracy, liberalism and conservatism. After the First World War, the course of political conflict in Europe fell into three partially overlapping phases. In the 1920s, liberals and conservatives were more or less united in seeking to repel the perceived threat of Bolshevism, while social democrats were divided between those who supported the new Soviet republic and were prepared to work with the communists and those who saw them as enemies. In Italy, where the post-war social and political crisis was particularly severe, conservatives threw in their lot with the fascists in a pre-emptive strike against the left, anticipating a realignment that became more general in the 1930s. After the Nazis came to power in Germany, communists came out of sectarian isolation and made common cause with social democrats and liberals in order to combat the growing threat to democracy itself.<sup>1</sup> This pattern of conflict persisted through the Second World War and its immediate aftermath and was only disrupted by the onset of the Cold War. Thereafter, social democrats, liberals and conservatives united in opposition to communism and fascism, while continuing to compete with each other for influence, votes and power.

Where they were strong, as in Italy and France, communists were systematically excluded from government. Elsewhere, they remained politically marginal. In an attempt to break out of their ghetto, most Western communist parties sought to distance themselves from the Soviet Union and to develop national-democratic “roads to socialism”. By the 1970s, Eurocommunism, as it came to be known, had become a recognised political tendency and in Italy, France and Spain broad left coalitions in which Eurocommunist parties played a leading or prominent role, stood on the brink of power. Meanwhile, a new formation was emerging on the right. Unlike the fas-

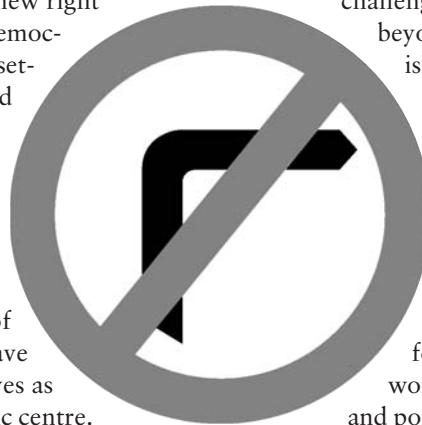
**KEYWORDS: LEFT AND RIGHT**

cist movements of the inter-war years, the new right proclaimed its commitment to liberty and democracy, while repudiating the post-war social settlement, which its conservative forebears had endorsed and, indeed, helped to shape.

**CHALLENGING THE NEO-LIBERAL CONSENSUS AND DECONGESTING THE CROWDED CENTRE**

At this point, a realignment began which has not yet run its course. Since the collapse of communism, Western communist parties have disbanded, declined or reinvented themselves as technocratic parties of the liberal-democratic centre. Ex- or sub-fascist parties, for their part, now pay lip service to democracy and have repositioned themselves on the nationalist right. Thus, the authoritarian side of political space currently stands vacant. At the same time, with the triumph of neo-liberalism, the entire political spectrum has been pulled to the right, dragging erstwhile social democrats and liberals with it. As a result, the left-hand side of political space is also vacant and the mainstream parties cluster around a narrow range of positions in the centre. Thus, while the ethical and philosophical issues that divide left and right have lost none of their significance, the effective framework of politics has shrunk, creating an unhealthy gulf between the political class and the general public and weakening the culture of democracy.

From this standpoint, the emergence of the democratic left as a serious political force would be an important step towards reforming our society's political institutions and revitalising democracy. Clearly, however, if it is to recover from defeat, regroup and



**The left must look beyond the short-term exigencies of electoral-legislative politics and seek to reclaim the ideological ground that is now occupied by neo-liberals.**

challenge neo-liberal hegemony, the left must look beyond the short-term exigencies of electoral-legislative politics and seek to reclaim the ideological ground that is now occupied by neo-liberals of varying hues. In summary form, the table below indicates what the contest is about and how the ideals of the contestants diverge. The opposing paradigms are models or ideal-types from which the programmes of actual political movements are likely to deviate as they compete for support and court allies. There is, in other words, an important distinction between projects and policies. Nevertheless, it remains vital for the left to have a strong sense of where it wants to go if it is to have any chance of shifting the balance of forces and starting to build a new, post-capitalist civilisation.

**NOTE**

1 Note that communists and fascists never formed an alliance, with the sole exception of the mutual non-aggression pact between Stalin and Hitler in 1939, which was short-lived and of tactical rather than strategic significance. The titanic military struggle that followed the Nazi invasion of Russia in 1941 strongly suggests that the division between left and right carried more weight than the authoritarian features that the two movements shared in common.

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<b>Democratic Left</b>	<b>Contested Issues</b>	<b>Neo-Liberal Paradigm</b>
<i>Positive autonomy</i> <i>Social condition</i> <i>Civil, political and social</i> <i>State and society</i>	<b>Political philosophy</b> Conception of freedom Ideals of equality Scope of citizenship Domain of democracy	<i>Negative liberty</i> <i>Respect, status, opportunity</i> <i>Civil and political only</i> <i>State</i>
<i>Post-capitalist</i> <i>Broad</i> <i>Business, public, household and voluntary</i> <i>Collective and systematic</i> <i>Mainly social</i> <i>Democratic planning</i> <i>Restrained</i> <i>Managed global convergence</i>	<b>Economic organisation</b> Generic form Accounting framework Sectoral categories Environmental responsibility Business ownership Co-ordinating mechanism Growth dynamic International regime	<i>Capitalist</i> <i>Narrow</i> <i>Private and public</i> <i>Individual and piecemeal</i> <i>Mainly private</i> <i>Market forces</i> <i>Unrestrained</i> <i>Global market framework</i>
<i>Socially embedded</i> <i>Self-development and control</i> <i>Economic, ethical and aesthetic</i> <i>Living well</i>	<b>Cultural norms</b> Conception of the person Cardinal virtue Criteria of value Central preoccupation	<i>Atomistic</i> <i>Self-reliance</i> <i>Strictly commercial</i> <i>Getting and spending</i>



# HAS CAMERON KILLED THE BNP?

The rise of the British National Party in the local elections of 2006 stalled the following year. **Adam Ramsay** examines the background and argues that mainstream politicians who “address the BNP agenda” with racist responses actually fuel the far right.

In the 2006 local elections the British National Party more than doubled its number of seats, from 20 to 56. In 2007, the BNP had a net gain of only one. What – or who – stopped the rising tide of the BNP?

The BNP have grown in size since 2002, when three councillors were elected in Burnley. Both Labour and Conservative politicians reacted by talking about immigration more. They told us that they had to become slightly fascist to stop people voting for a real fascist party. In the 2005 general election Michael Howard proposed that the UK withdraw from the 1951 UN refugee convention, and impose a quota of refugees coming to the UK<sup>1</sup>. He made immigration one of six themes for his election campaign. He told people immigrants were to blame for their problems. Labour promised to introduce electronic tagging and detention for those with “unfounded” asylum claims<sup>2</sup>. The BNP’s share of the national vote almost quadrupled.

## **MEDIA OBSESSION WANED**

In December 2006, David Cameron became leader of the Conservative Party. As we know, he attempted to change the party’s image. He flew to Svalbard to look at melting glaciers. He changed the party logo. He stopped talking

**The more politicians tell voters that immigration is the cause of their problems, the more they will vote BNP.**

about immigration. Slowly, the media obsession with asylum seekers waned. So did BNP growth.

Conventional political wisdom would say that the BNP vote would rise as Cameron left space to the right. Labour Culture Minister Margaret Hodge claims that 80% of her constituents have considered voting BNP. She uses this as an excuse to say that social housing should be distributed on the basis of ethnicity rather than need – her argument is, essentially, that if she fails to be a bit racist, the BNP will get in, and be even more racist. The evidence from the election this year seems to show that the opposite is true. The more politicians tell voters that immigration is the cause of their problems, the more they will vote BNP.

## **DIFFERENT REASONS**

This argument does assume a causal link between public discourse during the election and the result of the election. It may be that the BNP rise has slowed for different reasons. However, the 2007 election was on the same cycle as the 2003 election – where the BNP did fairly well. Many of those who lost their seats – such as in Burnley – may well have just been bad local councillors. There are numerous stories of BNP councillors failing to turn up, admitting they don’t understand meetings, or

being rude to voters. However, the fact that it was on the 2003 cycle also shows that there were elections in many core BNP areas. Under such circumstances, with an unpopular Blair still hanging on, and Cameron all but ignoring immigration, many would have expected the BNP vote to grow to fill the space to the right of Cameron. The BNP themselves were expecting to double their number of seats. The fact that they failed to do so seems to show that the analysis used by politicians like Hodge is simply wrong.

## **POLITICAL LEADERSHIP**

What this seems to demonstrate is the significance of political leadership. If politicians and the media tell voters that an election is about cutting immigration, voters will elect those they think will deal with the “problem”. If politicians tell voters that petty racism is ok, they are more likely to be petty racists.

There are two things that are interesting about this. The first is that it seems to show Labour and the Tories either get it wrong when they attempt to squeeze the BNP, or they just use the BNP as an excuse to scapegoat immigrants for the failures in their policies more broadly. The second is how this impacts on how we look at politics more broadly. It shows

## CAMERON AND THE BNP

how susceptible voters are to political leadership – especially when it comes to priorities.

### ELECTORAL AGENDA

That politicians and the media have more agency in setting the electoral agenda than they admit – or, perhaps, realise – is not an original point. The government has succeeded in taking away civil liberties by telling us terrorism is a national emergency. Alex Salmond persuaded Scottish voters that the recent election was a poll for First Minister, and his “vision for Scotland”. The 2004 US presidential election was not about the fact that Bush had made most people poorer. It was about “patriotism”. However, it is a relevant one. If the electorate doesn’t care enough about climate change or poverty, is this the fault of voters, or politicians?

More directly, what the BNP result seems to show is that the “need to address the agenda of the BNP” is not a valid excuse for racism. When Margaret Hodge says housing should be distributed on the grounds of ethnicity rather than need, she is not squeezing the BNP. She is fuelling them. She is blaming the housing crisis on immigrants. Does she do this because she really thinks this is the best way to deal with the BNP, or because immigrants are an easy scapegoat for failed government housing policy?

■ *Adam Ramsay is a social and environmental activist concerned with student issues, international development and environmental justice. A politics and philosophy student at Edinburgh University, he is Scottish regional representative for People and Planet, and recently organised the inaugural event for Student Democratic Left.*

### NOTES

- 1 *Are you thinking what we’re thinking?* – the Conservative Party manifesto 2005
- 2 *Britain – forward not back* – The Labour Party manifesto 2005

# CHRISTMAS – CELEBRATION OR SURVIVAL?

What did last Christmas mean for you? Was it something you looked forward to – a festival that brought your family together? Or was it something that you approached with dread – with only rows and debt to look forward to? Was Christmas something to be celebrated or survived?

For many women today, Christmas brings feeling of panic, followed by exhaustion and then anti-climax. They feel driven to spend, spend, spend on presents for the children and then provide a feast that would normally feed them for at least a week. And all this on the minimum income. No wonder all some of them hope for is the ability to get through it in one piece. Could there be another way? A way of celebrating that doesn’t break the bank or create stress?

ALTERnativity has produced a resource pack (Christmas – Celebration or Survival), for women that enables them to think through some of the questions they have, the problems they face, and then develop their own coping strategies. The material has been produced by women – written and trialled in areas of poverty in Glasgow and Paisley – by women of all ages, in differing circumstances, but with one thing in common: they somehow feel let down by the way we celebrate Christmas.

The facts of Christmas are a long way from the glitzy display shown in magazines, and the pressure to live up to these images adds stress, not least to the finances. In June of last year the average household in the UK had debts of £7,750 (excluding mortgage) and a recent survey found that almost 80% of people worry about the financing of Christmas. Many will still not have paid off last year’s presents by this Christmas. In the

poorer areas of the cities the “Provy Man” – lenders with a 140% interest charge – is knocking the doors just when the pressure to buy is at its highest.

So what is ALTERnativity’s answer to this? It is very simple – get women together, get them talking, and then get them to agree what they will do differently. The women who took part in the pilot said that it acted as a form of group counselling; they were also very clear that they would not consider joining facilities offered by the authorities, such as financial management or stress counselling. They felt free to share their worries and their pressures and the materials in the pack helped them to make decisions together. ALTERnativity recognises that it is almost impossible to stand against the consumer Christmas alone, but trying to do it with friends not only gives the necessary support but is also fun.

Using women’s own experiences as a starting point, the pack draws on the Christmas story, as well as scenes from around the world and popular films like *The Wizard of Oz*, and provides the basis for evenings (or mornings, or afternoons) that are both thought-provoking and entertaining.

The pack deliberately spans from October through to February – beginning early enough for some decisions to be made together about any change they might want to make, but allowing space to reflect after Christmas on the stories and, if appropriate, to support each other through the grey days of the early New Year.

It is offered as a resource for leaders of women’s groups or indeed for anyone who wants to bring women together to talk about Christmas.

**Maggie Lunan**  
[www.alternativity.org.uk](http://www.alternativity.org.uk)

# DIARY: PARTY TIME

Party politics preoccupy **"The Hat"** in the run-up to his 65th thrash ...

It's party time, folks, and man about town, yours truly, is about to celebrate 65 glorious years on the planet. As you would expect, many celebs will be there. But missing from the guest list are two friends of yore, due in part to other commitments but mainly because I am choosy.

Dr John (Hard Man) Reid, an old friend from my "ivy-covered" days at uni used to be a real party animal and attended many a bash in our fair capital. He required no invitation to lift his voice in song and at one such party that was fairly lowpin' with dancing, drinking and the crack he demanded in the soft, reverential tones for which he is noted that there be a sing-song. He was told in no uncertain terms that a period of silence from him would be appreciated. Undaunted, he found a guitar and proceeded to murder a medley of rebel songs to unanimous disapproval.

He was deaf to all appeals so someone decided to improve his hearing by applying the well-known curative powers of the copper-bottomed frying pan to his bonce. Unsurprisingly, "Comrade" Reid was rendered unconscious. On reviving he resumed his recital showing at an early age that he was oblivious to informed taste and majority opinion. By the way, the hard man image was a late acquisition which seemed to coincide with power. At Uni he was a pussy cat and in the event of a "stramash" his absence could be relied upon. And once in power you don't have to get blood on your hands when you can get it on the hands of your subordinates.

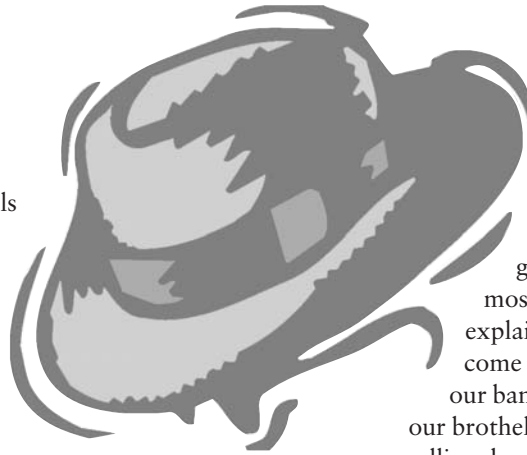
Another absentee from my birthday bash will be my former side-kick Dr Kim, Today a Ministry, Tomorrow the Cabinet, Howells. In an earlier incarnation

"Comrade" Howells was a coal-miner and professional rugby player, then a mature student (and distinguished himself by gaining a doctorate). As students did in those days he got by with the assistance of various grants. After a spell in the employ of the Welsh NUM (where, incidentally, he gained a close-up view of Arthur Scargill's vanity politics) he became a Welsh MP. At Westminster a blinding flash of light from the sky converted him to the unwisdom of the "plush" student life he oft had led. Prudent principles of political economy should be applied and the corrupting effect of student grants ended. And they should pay their own fees! The ladder he had so recently climbed was pulled up thus ensuring that fewer working-class youngsters from the valleys would follow in his footsteps. As we are sometimes heard to say in Scotland, "Tae hell wi' you, Jack. Ah'm fire-proof."

Dr Kim of the Coalfields was last seen out on the town with the King of Saudi Arabia! See ambition. See oil. See arms sales. See human rights! Excuse me while I collapse with merriment.

So my two former friends will be absent friends the Big Day, but their space will more than amply filled by the presence of my old pal, TAM WHITE, the great Scottish blues exponent. Play it again, Tam.

According to our unimpeachable media there appears to be a blight on the land in the form of a dearth of aboriginal desperadoes. Honest. If it's not the Russian mafia, it's East European or Turkish or Chinese drugs lords. In the last edition of



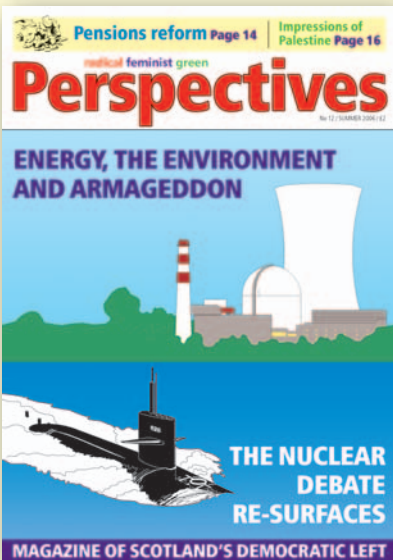
**He was deaf to all appeals so someone decided to improve his hearing by applying the well-known curative powers of the copper-bottomed frying pan to his bonce.**

Gangster Monthly, Donald MacCorleone, godfather of Scotland's most powerful cosa nostra, explained their plight. "They come over here and they rob our banks. They move into our brothels. They steal our jobs selling drugs tae kids. Some of them cannae even threaten folk in oor ane language! Ahm I alone in thinking something should be done about it?" Makes you yearn for the days when you could rely on being beaten up and robbed by one of your own.

To the Joan Eardley exhibition on the Mound for the regular dosage of culture my sensitive soul requires. It's the biggest exhibition of her paintings since she settled here and began to derive her inspiration from the harsh Scottish environment. Truly a remarkable show. One of the attendants told me that the standing exhibition in the National Gallery includes the work of not one single woman artist. Comment is superfluous.

And what about the workers? Well, yours truly had a recent chat with some postal workers about their efforts to keep this crucial service alive and well. They had very unflattering opinions as to the competence of their employers. One of them, no doubt an extremist, was of the view that if the IQs of the entire management were added up it would total less than that of your average table. In current postal service promotions customers are being urged to use their local postal service (with the aid of a Joan Collins icon: very tasteful) while hundreds of offices are systematically closed down. Talk about the contradictions of capitalism!

And so to bed.  
**The Hat**



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