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radical feminist green

# Perspectives

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## NEW GOVERNMENT, NEW POLITICS?



## THE ELECTION – A NEW ERA FOR WOMEN?

MAGAZINE OF SCOTLAND'S DEMOCRATIC LEFT

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## EDITORIAL

# 1707–2007: HISTORY AND POLITICS

If a week is a long time in politics, to coin the oft-quoted quip of Labour prime minister Harold Wilson in 1964, how long is 300 years? Let's be prosaic and answer "three hundred years": a time span certainly longer than a week, and a highly significant period this year for Scotland.

The 300 years in question are those following the Act of Union of 1707, when Scotland ceded its national sovereignty to a London-based parliament. So 2007 is a hugely symbolic year for the SNP to have taken power for the first time as the Scottish Government, even by the most slender of margins.

In our examination of the outcome and implications of the new political set-up in Scotland, Peter McColl observes that, unlike the situation at UK level where the alternative to Labour is the neo-liberal politics of the Tories, in Scotland there is a social democratic consensus. However, there is a danger that the SNP administration, now politically far from the days when the party were branded "Tartan Tories", pick up where Labour left off, sharing many of their assumptions about the methods for the delivery of pledges, but lacking the radical edge to examine and implement policies that tackle more effectively many of the long-standing problems Scotland faces.

Mhairi McGowan, in a separate take on the post-election scene, examines what women might hope for from the new administration, and whether the SNP will continue the positive developments seen under the previous executive.



... 2007 is a hugely symbolic year for the SNP to have taken power for the first time as the Scottish Government, even by the most slender of margins.

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

While the SNP will want to show they are competent in government, the issue of independence will continue to loom. It is vital, as we have argued in this column before, that the debate about Scotland's future be open, honest and well-informed.

The circumstances and motives that led to the Act of Union have been a major source of historical and political controversy in Scotland in the years since 1707. In a review of Christopher Whatley's *The Scots and the Union*, Davie Laing considers this book "A major work of historical revisionism and henceforth our nationalist school of historians will have their work cut out ...". We will be returning to the theme of 1707 in the next issue of *Perspectives* (see box below).

While on the subject of anniversaries, 2007 marks 70 years since the death of the great Italian communist, Antonio Gramsci. If Gramsci has passed you by, read Andy Pearmain's article which not only outlines the main points of Gramsci's thought, but also argues their continuing relevance.

Indeed, Gramsci's ideas inform *Feelbad Britain*, a book reviewed by Doug Chalmers, which examines the social malaise underlying Britain in the last years on Blair's premiership.

Lastly, David Purdy kicks off the first of a series of articles examining key words that are part of our political vocabulary: in this case *democracy*.

Many thanks as usual to all our contributors.

Coming in the next issue of **Perspectives:**

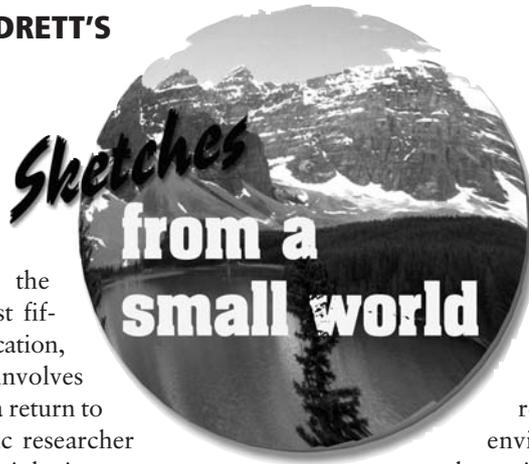
**When will it all end? Scotland and the Union of 1707**

by Ewen Cameron / **Keywords: Left and Right** by David Purdy / **Has Cameron killed the BNP?** by Adam Ramsey

Issue 16 will be available mid December. For subscription details see back cover.



## EURIG SCANDRETT'S



Research is on my mind at the moment. Having spent the last fifteen years working in adult education, I now find myself in a job which involves doing research. In some ways this is a return to my first “proper” job as a scientific researcher although now I’m researching as a sociologist.

In fact, research is not that different from adult education, or at least it needn’t be. In adult education, knowledge is generated when a tutor enters into dialogue with their students. The tutor brings a certain expertise, such as historical background, access to the literature, an analysis borne of theory, particular skills; whilst the students bring their own expertise: the experience and knowledge which they have of their own situation, whether that be experience of employment, parenthood, unemployment or discrimination. In the work of adult education, two kinds of knowledge interact with one another and generate new knowledge, understandings, ways of seeing the world, which affect students and tutors alike.

In sociological research, both researchers and “researched” bring knowledge and experience about their context and work to understand the social processes which are occurring. The researcher has the advantage of access to the analytical literature, and the “researched” has the advantage of being able to test the analysis against their experience of the world. This dialogical process is, it seems to me, what a sociological researcher must aim for if their research is to have social, political and ethical meaning.

My research is focusing on social responses to environmental damage. What happens when a community is affected by environmental pollution? How do they respond? Who responds? In particular, how do the more or less active participants in the campaigns learn about the issue and what can be done? By engaging in and analysing how people learn the skills and knowledge of environmental campaigning, researchers might understand how adult education can be a resource for community campaigns and social movements. It is this aspiration to resource those struggles for justice which motivate the research.

I am part of a research project funded by the Economic and Social Research Council into the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) in the environmental justice movement in Scotland. By exploring three case studies – two community campaigns and one national campaigning organisation – we are trying to understand how people learn, what kind of learning takes place, and what role ICTs play in this process. Communities are not static geographi-

**Knowledge is not the same as power, but access to knowledge can contribute to challenging powerful international capital and its state functionaries.**

cal places, but dynamic social activities through which individuals interact, information is shared, culture is created and reproduced and identities are formed and reformed. When communities are affected by environmental damage, this will change the dynamic as individuals become campaigners and groups participate in political action. For some people, the particular environmental problem will start to be understood, not for itself but for the conditions which have brought it about, including social, economic and ecological trends within a globalising capitalism. With this understanding, community campaigns can become part of a social movement.

This is one of the reasons why ICTs are interesting here. ICTs are technologies for information and communication, which are necessary but not sufficient constituents of learning. They have become the tools of campaigners. Moreover, they make possible the connections between local and general events, and the links between similarly affected communities across the world.

In another area of research I am seeking to learn from the experience of one of the most remarkable and longstanding environmental justice campaigns in the world. I have written before about the gas leak from the United Carbide pesticide factory in Bhopal, India, the subsequent deaths and illness caused and the campaign for justice by the survivors. It remains the biggest industrial environmental disaster and the exemplar of the environmental consequences of globalising capitalism. Tens of thousands of poor and badly-educated Bhopalis have been affected and many continue to campaign for compensation, rehabilitation and to bring to justice the management of United Carbide, and its subsequent owners Dow Chemicals. How have they sustained this campaign for 23 years? How have they engaged with the often highly technical scientific, medical and legal information which the campaign has generated, largely in English, a language which few of the campaigners know?

As a researcher my objective is to have a dialogue with some of these campaigners, to learn from the wealth of their analysis and to contribute to the campaign the resources which I have access to. Knowledge is not the same as power, but access to knowledge can contribute to challenging powerful international capital and its state functionaries.

For information on supporting the Bhopal campaign, see [www.bhopal.org](http://www.bhopal.org). More information on the ESRC research is available on [www.education.ed.ac.uk/hce/learninginsocialmovements/index.html](http://www.education.ed.ac.uk/hce/learninginsocialmovements/index.html)

# 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**



# NEW GOVERNMENT, NEW POLITICS?

May's election was won by the SNP by the narrowest of margins. **Peter McColl** argues the result is an opportunity for change ... but will we end up with more of the same?

This May's Scottish election result must be seen as an opportunity to change Scotland for the better – there has been much interesting talk of a “New Politics”. Many commentators observe that Scotland has an overwhelming social democratic consensus. While this has meant that the replacement of a Labour government which was perceived to be tired and short on ideas can be achieved without electing a neo-liberal government – as in the UK –



there is a danger that this produces a convergence around particular ideas and methods of delivery.

This is most marked in the approach that both the SNP and Labour have taken to health provision. While the NHS consumed a third of the Scottish Executive budget in the last Parliament, there is very little thinking about how to promote health – beyond advertising

campaigns suggesting that people wash their hands or eat more fresh food. While these messages may be

important, it seems a terribly wasted opportunity to change the ill-health culture that requires society to spend so much on treating sickness. The SNP in the run up to the election, and since, seem to be most concerned with the, again valid, aim of cutting waiting lists and with keeping various general hospitals open.

## VISIONARY APPROACH

A truly visionary approach would not be to move away from this, but would be to try to change the aspects of Scottish life and culture that promote ill health: the long hours culture, the excessive marketing of products that not only impoverish us, but make us unwell

## WE LIVE IN INTERESTING TIMES

A lot has happened since the Scottish Parliament and council elections in May. We have, perhaps fittingly since this year is the 300th anniversary of the Act of Union, a new nationalist administration in power, the product of their election victory that left them the largest party by a single seat.

Indeed, they nearly didn't make it as a late surge by Labour almost confounded their (Labour's) poor showing in the opinion polls in the weeks before the election. Post-election, only the Greens (now with two MSPs) were willing to come to some sort of agreement with the SNP. So Alex Salmond is leading a minority government.

Given that the electorate's experience of government (at the UK level) has overwhelmingly been one of single parties taking power on the basis of the support of a large minority of voters, we have now, in Scotland, the intriguing situation of a government having to conduct its business on the basis of a constant dialogue with the other parties to see what is, and what is not, manageable. And we should not forget that the outgoing (majority) administration was a coalition of Labour and Liberal

Democrats, again something unseen (outside wartime) at Westminster.

But just being able to govern, albeit as a minority, is a major prize for the SNP. Much of their energy is being devoted to showing that they are competent in government – a critical factor for them if they are to consolidate their position at the next election.

If Scottish Labour and the LibDems were disappointed with the election results, the squeeze on the small parties was both intriguing and saddening. How much this was due to the re-designed ballot paper (which was responsible for the huge number of spoiled papers) is unclear, but virtually all the gains made in 2003 were wiped out with the Greens returning just two MSPs and the SSP/Solidarity groups being lost completely.

Some consolation, at least for the Greens, was a significant increase in representation in the council elections held on the same day under the newly-introduced PR multi-member ward system.

**Sean Feeny**

## NEW GOVERNMENT, NEW POLITICS?

and unhappy. There is no reason why we must live lives where we strive for more and more material and service goods that demonstrably do not improve human happiness or our society. As well as managing the health service better a cross-cutting approach to health in all the government departments might deliver the sorts of health benefits that everyone seems keen to achieve.

There is a great deal of evidence that it is psycho-social factors, rather than the widely understood behavioural influences that are greater in determining health outcomes, and indeed inequalities. By focusing the government on well-being, rather than as a guarantor of good business conditions, it will be not only health that improves, but the fabric of society that will, in turn, promote good health. The work by Richard Wilkinson and other health sociologists clearly demonstrates that tackling inequality will promote good health.

### MANAGERIAL TECHNIQUES

Similarly, the dominant approach to education since the 1980s – introducing managerial techniques and annual testing for students generates an annual media frenzy as exam results improve. It is extraordinary that no one realises that this is neither because the youth of Scotland is getting ever more academically able, nor that the exams are being “dumbed down”, but that the criteria remain the same year to year, and teachers become more adept at teaching to those criteria. That the criteria are narrow, and fail to develop critical thinkers or skilled school leavers, compounds the problem.

There now exists a real opportunity to reinvigorate civil society using the mechanisms that the outgoing Labour administration had started to support, such as community engagement, and those that are newer, such as a renewed public control of public services. By reintroducing a level of public engagement to the decision making process the possibility of

**Rather than focusing on MSPs' expenses, the quality newspapers could focus on the way in which those MSPs vote.**

reinvigorating the process of political debate in Scotland becomes real. Using techniques such as participatory budgeting will make it clear what choices need to be made, and how money could be better spent. The Neighbourhood Partnership structures may be able to achieve this level of participation in democracy. Their antecedents in Social Inclusion Partnerships have certainly delivered a greater level of awareness of how decision-making processes function.

### POLITICAL JOURNALISM

A new consensus in politics must be met by a media willing to serve the public by serving politics. It is unfortunate that the quality of Scottish political journalism is so low. Rather than focusing on MSPs' expenses, the quality newspapers could focus on the way in which those MSPs vote, and how this affects Scotland. But that is only a start. The real change must come in the attitude to politics and decision making. Now the *Scotsman's* ownership is less ideologically motivated, the opportunity is there to move away from the cynical anti-politics of the Andrew Neil era. There is plenty of news to keep two national quality newspapers in business, and plenty of politics for them to comment on. The 2007 election held out hope of this for the first time – with papers giving serious attention to Scottish politics for the first time since the Parliament building fiasco blew up.

A new media – with extension into broadcasting – will allow development of the sort of national political consciousness that will create scrutiny of decisions at all levels, and facilitate a better understanding of how to achieve a more coherent democracy and a more socially just society.

### DEVELOPING EXPERTISE

This confidence may also lead to the development of Scotland's expertise in particular areas. New attention to Scotland's global responsibility may result in the development of facilities such as

an international centre for peace. By providing the infrastructure for peace making, and for training the peace makers of the future, Scotland can make its mark on the world stage. A similar initiative may allow Scotland to host the international arbitration body to decide on debt relief. By following the example of other small nations – such as Norway – developing particular expertise, Scotland will not only influence the world in a positive manner, but will also build on an already existing commitment to social justice and peace.

One last thing that needs to be said is that in the run up to the next election there must be a national and concerted effort by the political parties, politicians and civil society to understand and communicate the way in which their vote can be made to count. It is simply unacceptable that the parties – and almost all are guilty of this – continue to play the electoral system to their own ends. While it is difficult to communicate information about electoral systems, it is surely preferable that we do this than end up with another election marred by electors' confusion.

One way to clarify the electoral system, and to ensure that voters know what they are voting for, would be to postpone local authority elections until 2012, to ensure they are on a different day to the Parliament elections. Putting the next set of elections in 2017 would mean that local authority elections would be equidistant from parliamentary elections and could then return to a four year interval.

This is an opportunity that may not come along again: an opportunity to change the national political culture, to reinvigorate democracy and to develop a shared sense that Scotland can make the world a better place. It is an opportunity we must all endeavour to make the most of.

■ Peter McColl was a researcher for Mark Ballard, a Green MSP in the last Scottish Parliament.

# THE ELECTION – A NEW ERA FOR WOMEN?

The establishment of the Scottish Parliament has facilitated the work of women's organisations. Will this welcome trend continue with the new SNP administration, asks **Mhairi McGowan.**

Watching the political process since the election has been fascinating. Much has happened that seemed if not impossible then very unlikely. Alex Salmond has emerged statesman-like from a previous persona that only ever showed glimpses of what could be. Labour in contrast has seemed thrwn, and bad losers both at a Scottish and British level, although as time passes Labour in Scotland seem more able to come to terms with their position in opposition.

Given the inability of parties to agree on a majority coalition, the building of consensus has become far more important than ever before and there seems to be less of a confrontational style within the parliament, although all parties including the SNP have found it difficult to sustain on occasion and have lapsed into the "norm" of point scoring. But on the whole, the political process seems far healthier, more proportional and more exciting. Yet despite the hope many have felt following the election and the signs of some radicalism by the SNP in some policy areas, there is an air of uncertainty for those of us working in the field of preventing violence against women.

Since devolution, organisations such as Engender and Scottish Women's Aid have found it much easier to have a conversation with

those in power in Holyrood. Issues such as gender budgeting or violence against women had become part of an ongoing conversation with Labour politicians. There was a space for some new ideas, albeit as one senior labour politician told me, "It's great, but we're tackling all the safe issues, there's still a need for a more radical approach." The ease of that conversation from Labour was understandable given that a number of the Labour MSPs were active either in the women's movement or in the particular issues under consideration. However, the point about concentration on what were seen as safe issues still remained.

## LOSS OF ENERGY

Another consequence, not altogether positive, of this easier conversation was the number of women who either stopped campaigning externally and concentrated their efforts within the Labour Party or indeed went to work for MSPs or the Scottish Executive, believing there would be better decisions taken if "good" people were on the inside. As well

as opening opportunities, this also meant a loss to the energy of the women's movement outside parliament.

However, despite these limitations, real advances have been made over the last eight years that have changed the lives of thousands of women and children and this should not be underestimated.

Engender's work on gender budgeting was seen as groundbreaking within the EU, while the issue of violence against women was tackled head on. Money was made available for core funding of local women's aid groups and new refuges were commissioned and built. A national group of experts was established to consider what could be done to combat domestic abuse at a strategic level and work with children who experience domestic abuse was also recognised and funded.

## MALE VIOLENCE

However, domestic abuse is not the only form of male violence that women experience. Other issues such as rape and sexual assault, childhood sexual abuse, forced marriage, trafficking and prostitution are also fundamentally important. There are signs that the links between these issues have begun to be seriously considered too. Scotland, unlike the rest of the UK, has had the courage and the foresight to broaden the policy agenda to include all forms of violence against women and in many



## A NEW ERA FOR WOMEN?

cases funding streams have followed. The Law Commission has investigated the abysmal conviction rate in relation to rape and sexual offences and has made recommendations to the Scottish Parliament regarding this. Every local authority has been tasked with expanding their work on domestic abuse to one where all forms of violence against women are tackled.

Developments such as these combined with the conversations mentioned earlier have established Scotland, in the minds of those working in the field, as a place where there is political will to move issues forward and find solutions.

So, given the new political landscape, is there any evidence that we have now come to the end of this period of support for dealing with this fundamental issue? Or should we confidently expect a further, positive step change in this area?

When asked about violence against women during a leader's debate two days before the election, Alex Salmond said there was agreement among the parties on the issue. However to me, Jack McConnell was more convincing as he spoke about specific issues including committing Labour to the implementation of the Law Commission's recommendations on rape. Alex was unable to talk beyond the level of generalities (albeit positively), even when asked again after the cameras stopped rolling, although he did give a commitment to consider the specific issue of the establishment of domestic abuse courts. Nevertheless, it must be said that in these early days of the new government, some doubt remains.

### ENCOURAGING SIGNS

It is certainly true that since the election there have been some encouraging signs; the Scottish Executive's Equality Unit has remained in place despite speculative rumours that had been prevalent to the contrary. Elish Angolini, originally appointed by Labour,

**... policy makers downplay the impact of violence against women and see it as a marginal issue or one where only a minority of women and children affected.**

has continued in the post of Lord Advocate and she has proved since her appointment under the previous government that she is willing to grapple with the problems of the current justice system when faced with the complexities of the violence against women agenda.

However, other less positive signs include the Tories being given the positions of Chair of both the Equality and Justice Committees – the only two committees they will chair. It is difficult therefore to escape the notion that the SNP must believe these committees are the safest in policy terms to “hand over” to the Tories, yet with appropriate political will, these two committees could oversee changes more radical than any seen over the last eight years. Without this will, momentum and opportunity can be lost. Labour MSP Helen Eadie was moved to resign her membership of two committees in protest at this, likening the Tories chairing equalities as being akin to Attila the Hun being put in charge of care in the community. So, should the apparent Tory ascendancy be put down to the SNP's lack of interest in this area? In reality, the situation is more complex; each political party “bids” for the committees they want, so it would seem that other political parties did not have the issue of equality high enough on their agenda either, thus allowing a Tory result almost by default.

### WOMEN'S LIVES BLIGHTED

There is a real opportunity for radical policy in this incredibly important area. The misery created by all forms of violence against women has consequences across every other department of the Scottish government. Many women's lives are blighted by the aftermath of male violence. The consequences for society can include increased levels of substance misuse and other health issues. Experience of violence also increases women's homelessness, children's truancy, and literacy levels and thousands never reach their true potential. There are still many parts of socie-

ty where policy makers downplay the impact of violence against women and see it as a marginal issue or one where only a minority of women and children affected. One in four women experience domestic abuse at some point in their lives, 100,000 children in Scotland are estimated to live with domestic abuse and one in two women has experienced an unwanted sexual contact. The conviction rate for rape has fallen to an all-time low of 3.9%.

### QUICK ACTION COULD BE TAKEN

The issue of violence against women therefore permeates the whole body politic in the new Scotland and the new opportunities facing the SNP are therefore almost endless. The implementation of the recommendations of the Law Commission on rape and sexual offences is long overdue. The research published by the previous Executive on Domestic Abuse Courts is a clear example where progress could be made. Scotland has one such court while England and Wales have sixty-four. Quick action could be taken here. Additionally, research into the real cost of violence against women to the public purse in Scotland could be undertaken; currently this is only available in England and Wales. The introduction of routine risk assessment and management could be implemented across the public sector and lives saved as a result. The use of human trafficking for the purpose of commercial sexual exploitation also deserves a higher political profile. Currently only Glasgow, outside London, has this issue marked as a priority.

The real question is thus whether the SNP will have the political will to continue the work of the previous executive: to accept there have been real gains and ensure this issue is not sidelined. The conversation must continue.

■ *Mhairi McGowan is a long-standing feminist activist and a member of Democratic Left Scotland.*



# GRAMSCI AND US

Seventy years after his death, the writings of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci are still resonant and relevant; he explored and developed political ideas that grappled with the complex nature of political power in western democracies.

**Andy Pearmain** outlines Gramsci's thoughts and their relevance to politics in Britain today.

This year is the 70th anniversary of the death of Antonio Gramsci. The “discovery” of Gramsci in the 1960s and '70s was central to the revival of the political left in Britain, and to a new, more open and creative form of Marxism that broke out of the theoretical impasses of Stalinism, Trotskyism and the remnants of 2nd International social democracy. With the onset of Thatcherism and the decline of the left, interest in Gramsci waned. For the last 30 years or so, Gramscianism in Britain has been largely confined to the increasingly obscure and arid terrain of “cultural studies”, and robbed of its political and historical charge. However, there are signs now of a revival of interest. Amongst many other aspects of the modern world, Gramsci offers us a way of understanding the continuing stranglehold of Thatcherism and the false dawn of New Labour, and a way out of the isolation and disorientation and fragmentation of whatever remains of “the democratic left”. So who was Gramsci, what did he have to say, and what does it mean to us now?

Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937) was born and brought up on the (then) remote Italian island of Sardinia. His family was cast into dire poverty by the imprisonment (on probably trumped-up charges) of their father Francesco when Antonio himself was still small. Disabled from infancy by curvature of the spine, Antonio excelled at his studies and eventually won a scholarship to Turin University in 1911. He began writing articles soon after for socialist journals and newspapers, and in 1916 left university to work as a journalist for the Socialist Party newspaper *Avanti!*

**Gramsci offers us a way of understanding the continuing stranglehold of Thatcherism and the false dawn of New Labour ...**

Gramsci was swept up in debate and agitation over the First World War, then the insurrectionary upheaval that peaked in the Soviet Revolution. The highpoint of the “Red Years” in Italy was the wave of factory occupations in 1919. The biggest and best organised were in Turin, where Gramsci helped to found the weekly *Ordine Nuovo* to direct and coordinate the factory council movement. In the wake of the movement's defeat by the employers' organisations, and amid bitter recrimination, the Italian Socialist Party split in 1921. Gramsci, already a convinced and committed Marxist, joined the newly founded Communist Party of Italy (PCI).

Soon after, he became a member of the Communist International Executive and spent much of 1922/23 in Moscow, where he met his wife Giulia. Back in Italy, the ex-socialist Mussolini and the Fascists seized power and began harassing the Communist Party and arresting its leaders. Gramsci returned to Rome in 1924 as party leader and elected MP with parliamentary immunity, leaving his wife and two sons in Moscow. Two years later, after much agonised debate on the left about whether its response to fascism should be democratic or revolutionary, Mussolini established effective and lasting dictatorship. Gramsci and other communist leaders were arrested or forced into exile.

Gramsci spent the remaining 10 years of his life in various fascist prisons, often in ill health and appalling conditions. In that time, he wrote 33 tightly packed notebooks of reflections on the history of Italy, Europe, the USA and the Soviet Union, on Marxist and liberal philosophy, and much else

## GRAMSCI AND US

besides. He was, for obvious reasons, preoccupied with the defeat of proletarian revolution in Western Europe, and with the ways in which the ruling classes had managed to restore or maintain their rule. He also maintained regular, insightful, and often deeply moving correspondence with his wife, sister-in-law, sons and other relatives and friends, though he never saw his wife and children again (his younger son was born after Gramsci's imprisonment, and never met his father).

The notebooks were smuggled out of Italy on Gramsci's death in 1937, and published in Italy in 1948–51. The PCI (Communist Party of Italy) had emerged from the war a mass party, with enormous influence and prestige, and a commitment (partly based on Gramsci's analyses) to democratic majority rule, and struggle on every front – not just economic or industrial, but cultural and political, and at every level of society. Within the international communist movement, this was a highly unusual approach, leading towards an explicit anti-Stalinism and what became known as “Eurocommunism”. The PCI was able to survive the Cold War, and remained through the 1960s and '70s a major force in Italy. Gramsci's legacy survives, despite Berlusconi and the various modern incarnations of fascism and reaction, in the “Olive Tree coalition” and the rich political culture of the Italian left, currently in government led by Romano Prodi.

### GRAMSCI IN BRITAIN

There has been more interest in Gramsci in Britain than any other country outside Italy, partly because of the strong historical parallels between the two countries, most obviously their partial “bourgeois revolutions”, which left them with sizeable aristocracies incorporated into their ruling “historic blocs” (the French just chopped their heads off). The first English translations of Gramsci appeared in the 1950s, but interest in Gramsci really took off in the 1970s, with the publication of *Selections from Prison Notebooks*, brilliantly translated, edited and introduced by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith. In the aftermath of “1968 and all that”, there was an appetite for the kind of open-minded, libertarian Marxism Gramsci seemed to offer. He was untainted by Stalinism and Trotskyism (ironically because of his imprisonment by Mussolini, early in the tormented life of the Communist International), and insistent upon the importance of cultural, social, political, ethical and ideological “superstructures” alongside the classically Marxist economic “base”.

Gramsci was consistently “anti-positivist”, which in a Marxist context set him against any notion of the “historic inevitability” of socialism. He insisted on the primacy of political action – this was Gramsci's most obvious common ground with Lenin, though Gramsci was plainly uncomfortable with Bolshevik vanguardism and elitism. He also consistently criticised the “economism” and “corporatism” of exclusively



**Gramsci was consistently ... against any notion of the “historic inevitability” of socialism.**

trade union or industrial action, and the idea that “wage struggle” was somehow inherently revolutionary or even progressive. He did, however, retain a deeply humanist commitment to the idea of historical progress, and insisted that all political regimes (even fascism) necessarily embodied some progressive, constructive impulses.

Two “centres” of Gramsci studies emerged in the '70s in Britain, around *New Left Review* and the “Eurocommunist” wing of the Communist Party, offering quite different and sometimes conflicting interpretations of Gramsci's writings. The *Prison Notebooks* in particular can be cryptic and internally contradictory, largely because of the circumstances of their composition, but also because Gramsci was unusually open to other, non-Marxist traditions and prepared to change his mind. Into the 1980s and '90s, interest in Gramsci waned, along with the fortunes of all wings of the British Left. Until recently, Gramsci only seemed to feature as a passing reference on Cultural Studies courses. There are signs now of a revival of interest in Gramsci across academia, especially in history and development studies, and in the wider world.

Certain key Gramscian concepts have proved especially resonant in Britain, though they're not always properly understood and deployed. Gramsci is more often bandied about than read in the original, even by people purporting to be “Gramscian” (Marx suffered a similar fate). In particular, the term *hegemony* is far richer than simply electoral defeat of your opponents or (as often applied to US foreign policy) military attack or threat, but represents a whole system of domination and collaboration which reaches into every aspect of life and human society. Crucially, it relies on the *consent* as well as *coercion* of subordinate or *subaltern groups*, and through a subtle blend of encouragement and intimidation, constructs a *common sense* about the way the world is, and how it can and cannot be changed. *Custom, tradition* and *culture* are central elements of this hegemonic “common sense”, which assembles a dominant historic bloc of social and political forces to support the ruling order. The leading British Gramscian Stuart Hall made much use of the term *national-popular*, to demonstrate how such successful historic blocs invariably connect to patriotism.

The role of *intellectuals* is crucial to the process of hegemony – both *traditional* intellectuals undertaking traditional intellectual functions in education, the law, religion and so on, and *organic* intellectuals, who take upon themselves responsibility for organising change, and provide a crucial point of contact between ruling elites and the masses. Periods of history are characterised either by *war of movement*, where change occurs rapidly and at particular points in society (the Soviet revolution was Gramsci's most obvious example), or by *war of position*, where change is much slower, broader and deeper, and less dramatic. This is the more typical situation in the west, with its relative-

ly developed and established (less “gelatinous”) economic, political and cultural systems.

Finally, *optimism of the will, pessimism of the intellect*, which became a kind of Gramscian watchword or motto in the 1970s, and has helped to see more than a few of us through dark times. In fact, the phrase was coined by the French author Romain Rolland, and appreciatively appropriated by Gramsci. I’m sure it helped him not just to endure imprisonment, but to keep working whenever he was physically and mentally capable. We could do with some of his endurance and determination, ruthless honesty and reasoned hope, right now in these, our ever darker times.

### WHY GRAMSCI? WHY NOW?

Gramsci, over all other left wing theoreticians, helps to explain the political defeat of popular forces and the restoration and maintenance of ruling class “hegemony”, especially in advanced, democratic, complex capitalist societies like our own. What changes and what remains effectively the same? What is truly significant (“epochal”) and what is contingent or trivial (“conjunctural”)? What action is best conducted through “civil society”, and what should be done to or by the state?

Gramsci has, I’m aware, been cited by some of its luminaries as an inspiration for New Labour. His name and ideas pop up in the strangest places, from Radio 4 profiles of government ministers (the briefly communist John Reid) to published memoirs (Philip Gould makes pivotal use of the term “Conservative hegemony” in his seminal New Labour text “The Unfinished Revolution”). There is a tenuous thematic connection between Gramsci and New Labour, via the latter-day Marxism Today and the “New Times” analysis of “post-Fordism”, but I would argue that Gramsci offers a means of making sense of rather than for New Labour.

In particular, Gramsci helps us see the historical continuities of Labourism, the ruptures wrought by Thatcherism, and New Labour’s curious (if often unacknowledged) relationship with both (and for that matter with the past in general). These historical themes run far deeper than the daily doings of parliamentarians and journalists, what passes for the stuff of contemporary politics; crucially, they also condition what politicians can and cannot achieve in any particular time or circumstance. For us now, they help to explain why New Labour has turned out such a major disappointment and, arguably, missed historic opportunity. It is an object rather than an agent of history – yes, even in its renewed, re-energised and comparatively competent Brown version.

A lot depends on how you see post-war British history, and whether you accept that there are deep ideological currents at work alongside the more easily detected and documented workings of the economy and the political system. Stuart Hall and other prominent Gramscians have argued a consistent and (I find) compelling narrative. The post-war social democratic



**New Labour represents a “transformist” or “molecular” adaptation of the continuing Thatcherite “passive revolution” (radical change imposed from above), to use particularly resonant and apposite Gramscian terms.**

consensus of Keynesian economics and welfare statism was broken in Britain in the 1970s, because the trade-off between capitalism and the welfare state was no longer sustainable. Thatcherism set about its dynamic, destructive/creative project of “regressive modernisation”, producing an entirely different political and economic, and above all ideological climate, characterised by the celebration of certain values – primarily self-reliance and self-interest – and the demonisation of others – the social and the collective. This culminated in the domination of neo-liberal capitalism and its associated “politico-ethical” framework in Britain and much of the rest of the world.

Along the way, “national-popular” support was won for a whole range of measures, which would have previously been anathema, such as the sale of council housing, privatisation of utilities, cutbacks in public services and benefits, and limitations on trades union power. This approach has been characterised as “authoritarian populism”. Certain key events served as intimidatory/educative jolts (recalling Gramsci’s pivotal couplet of coercion/consent) to public feeling, like the Falklands War and the 1984 miners strike, or the late-’80s “big bang” of financial deregulation. Fundamental shifts took place in our social ethos – from the collective to the individual, from the public to the private, from society to family, from we to I, from production to consumption – and congealed into a new, all-embracing and almost incontrovertible (i.e. hegemonic) “common sense”.

New Labour explicitly accepted this new settlement, and set itself the task of reshaping the people to suit the needs of the new global market economy, thus inverting the logic of orthodox social democracy. From privatisation and deregulation, mass redundancy and unemployment, it was but a short step to Welfare to Work and MacJobs, via the popular folk-devil of the “scrounger” and the politer terms “underclass” and “dependency culture”, and now the darker-hued bogey of the “asylum seeker”. As such, New Labour represents a “transformist” or “molecular” adaptation of the continuing Thatcherite “passive revolution” (radical change imposed from above), to use particularly resonant and apposite Gramscian terms.

It remains to be seen what comes next, some kind of “new” New Labour under Brown or a “new”, Cameronian, Conservatism that proves a more comfortable political fit on the lingering, still vigorous ideological corpus of Thatcherism, even while rhetorically ditching the legacy of Thatcher herself. We are clearly due another transformist stage in what Gramsci always insisted was the dynamic process of hegemony. It will be especially interesting to see whether the electoral “winners” pursue Thatcherism’s more authoritarian or libertarian impulses, or forge some new national-popular combination (as the “high” Thatcherism of strong state/free market so effectively did). In the meantime, the democratic left

## GRAMSCI AND US

could do a lot worse than take a close, hard look at our own recent history, see where we went wrong, and as Gramsci would insist, take full responsibility for our own (generally inglorious) failures. That's what a few of us have attempted in the essay *Feelbad Britain* (available at [hegemonics.co.uk](http://hegemonics.co.uk)).

In the meantime, dig out your dusty old copy of *Prison Notebooks* and have another look. Every reading of Gramsci yields some new insight. Here's one of my current favourites, written about early 20th century Italy but so readily applicable to our own rather tired culture and society – “Hence, squalor of cultural life and wretched inadequacy of high culture. Instead of political history, bloodless erudition; instead of religion, superstition; instead of books and great reviews, daily papers and broadsheets; instead of serious politics, ephemeral quarrels and personal clashes” (*Prison Notebooks*, p.228).



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### SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

- *Selections from Prison Notebooks*, A. Gramsci, edited by Q. Hoare and G. Nowell Smith, London 1971 (Lawrence and Wishart).
- *The Antonio Gramsci Reader*, edited by David Forgacs, London 1988 (Lawrence and Wishart).
- *Antonio Gramsci – Life of a Revolutionary*, G. Fiori, translated by Tom Nairn, London 1970 (NLB).
- *Prison Letters*, translated by Hamish Henderson, London 1996 (Pluto).
- *The Hard Road to Renewal*, Stuart Hall, London 1989 (Verso).



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- 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.
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## KEYWORDS:

# DEMOCRACY

Launching a new series of articles which will critically examine words and their meanings – and their role in the struggle for a better society – **David Purdy** dissects *democracy* – people power.

Starting with this issue, *Keywords* will be a regular feature in *Perspectives*. The title is borrowed from a book by Raymond Williams published in 1976. A leading figure in the early New Left, Williams was one of Britain's most original Marxist thinkers and, together with Stuart Hall and Richard Hoggart, helped to found the discipline of cultural studies. He is now chiefly remembered for two best-selling books: *Culture and Society 1780–1950* and *The Long Revolution*, published in 1958 and 1961, respectively, and later brought out in Penguin editions.<sup>1</sup> Conceived as a sequel to these works, *Keywords* combines cultural history with conceptual analysis. It consists of short, linked accounts of some two hundred words that came to play a central part in political and cultural discourse after the Industrial Revolution, paying particular attention to changes in popular usage and to ongoing controversies about the “proper” definitions of terms.

Williams himself described *Keywords* as “the record of an inquiry into a vocabulary: a shared body of words and meanings in our most general discussions, in English, of the practices and institutions which we group together as culture and society,” and he commended his historical approach to questions of meaning and value over the more abstract modes of inquiry favoured by philosophers and students of linguistics. No review of the words we use to understand and deal with our social experience can be neutral. *Keywords* typically encompass a range of meanings which bear the imprint of dominant classes and professions, but which, provided we become conscious of the issues at stake, we can reclaim and reshape as we make our own language and history.

### DEMOCRACIES, ANCIENT AND MODERN

In the magazine of Democratic Left Scotland, what better place to start than with the word democracy? The root words here are the Greek *demos* – people – and *kratos* – power. Aristotle (*Politics*, IV, 4) wrote: “A democracy is a state where the freemen and the poor, being in the majority, are invested with the power of the state.” We must, however, beware of reading ancient texts through modern eyes. For over two thousand years, most political thinkers used the term democracy in a pejorative sense. From Plato to Burke, “the rule of the people” was generally understood to mean a form of unbridled popular power in which the government, acting on behalf of the majority, suppresses or oppresses minorities, especially the minority of substantial property-owners. Dissent from this view was rare. In England, for example, prior to 1789 the only significant advocates of democracy were the Levellers, who formed the radical democratic wing of Cromwell's army during the English Civil War, and Tom Paine (1737–1809), the

scourge of landed wealth and royal power, who rose from humble origins to play a leading part in the American and French Revolutions.

Until the middle of the nineteenth century, the idea of democracy still inspired fear and loathing among the rich and powerful. The emergence of the term representative democracy in the American Revolution was a conscious reaction to this. Writing in 1777, Alexander Hamilton distinguished between popular rule in the traditional sense and rule by elected representatives. Where deliberative or judicial powers are directly exercised by popular assemblies, “you must expect error, confusion and instability”. To obviate these dangers he proposed “a representative democracy, where the right of election is well secured and regulated, and the exercise of legislative, executive and judicial authorities is vested in select persons.” Adopting this modified American use, liberal thinkers such as Bentham and Mill recommended representative government as the only practicable form of democracy in large societies and argued the case for universal adult

## KEYWORDS: DEMOCRACY

suffrage, to be introduced step by step, rather than all at once, for the sake of social stability.

### LIBERAL DEMOCRACY: PROGRESS AND REGRESS

Since the late nineteenth century, the liberal conception of democracy has eclipsed the older image of popular class rule. The term has now come to mean a state in which the military and police forces are subordinate to the civil authorities; legislative, executive and judicial powers are separated and all arms of the state, including the intelligence and security services, are subject to the rule of law; all legal residents are citizens and all adult citizens are entitled to stand for office and vote in periodic national and local elections; rival political parties compete for popular support; and conditions of open political competition are maintained by upholding certain universal freedoms: of thought, conscience, expression, movement and assembly. The fact that actually existing democracies frequently fall short of this ideal in no way detracts from its appeal.

There is, of course, no guarantee that democratic institutions, once established, will not subsequently fall into decay. If we take the whole period since 1940, two trends stand out. On the one hand, democracy has spread around the world to countries that previously laboured under military or one-party rule, though the disastrous failure of the neo-conservative attempt to export democracy to the Middle East by force of arms shows that it is easier to topple a dictator than to build a new regime. On the other hand, in the historic heartlands of liberal democracy – in Britain, Sweden, North America and the Antipodes – which remained free from Nazi occupation during the war and where communism never became a major political force, the broad course of democratic development resembles a parabola, rising to a

peak in the mid-twentieth century, but subsequently falling away.<sup>2</sup>

Clear signs of decay have appeared since the collapse of the post-war settlement in the 1970s, the rise of neo-liberalism and the advent of the borderless economy. Popular participation in political parties and elections is waning. So too is the power of trade unions and other popular movements to influence public policy, whether because they now face stronger opposition from business interests, because external constraints on national policy options have become more binding, or because the movements themselves are less well organised and more fragmented than they used to be and can no longer extract concessions from governments by invoking the “spectre of communism”.

### DEMOCRATIC THEORY REVISITED

In thinking about recent trends and future prospects, it is helpful to review the ends or goals that democratic government is meant to serve. Amongst the political thinkers who over the past three hundred years have sought to justify democracy, two strands of thought are evident. One focuses on the performance of the government system: that is, on the nature or quality of the rules and decisions it tends to produce. From this standpoint, democracy has been variously commended: as the best way to prevent rulers from abusing their power; as a means of ensuring that no section of society is excluded from the political process or, more generally, of equalising access to political power; or finally as a procedure for discovering the general, collective will of the community, as distinct from the particular, sectional interests of individual persons or social groups. All these arguments are concerned with the traditional goal of securing good government.

The second strand of thought focuses on the effects of the political system on the character of its citizens. Thus, John Stuart Mill

(*Considerations on Representative Government*, Chapter 1) argues that “the most important point of excellence which any form of government can possess is to promote the virtue and intelligence of the people themselves.” In other words, the merit of democratic government is not, or not only, that it makes for better government, but that it creates an environment for making better people. Writers in the first tradition take human beings as they are, with a fixed nature and disposition, and seek to devise institutions that will produce good government or at least avoid bad. Those in the second, while not disputing that democracy is, on this point, better than any of the alternatives, are also concerned with its potential educative functions: that is, with its capacity for transforming people’s motivational drives and mental outlook.

Mill cites four ways in which participation in democratic processes enhances people’s capacities and achievements by comparison with systems in which decisions are made by a small elite. First, participants come to recognise their own moral and intellectual worth. This raises their self-esteem and makes it more difficult for power-holders to treat them instrumentally, as mere pawns in games that are none of their choosing. Second, participation fosters an active, independent type of personality capable of deferring immediate gratification in favour of longer term goals or pursuits. All human progress, Mill insists, depends on strong and persistent efforts to bend circumstances to our will rather than submitting passively to fate. Third, participation encourages both leaders and followers to cultivate the habits of consensual government rather than relying on trust, appealing to tradition or resorting to force. Leaders are obliged to persuade people to follow them and to justify their actions in terms of ulterior goals and standards which their followers accept. Fourth, participation encourages a

*demos* = people

breadth of vision and sympathy which transcends sectional interest. Participants learn to see problems as they appear to others whose interests diverge from or conflict with theirs.

## TOWARDS A DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY

Mill's perspective on democracy is especially pertinent for those who refuse to accept that democratic capitalism is as good as it gets. We are accustomed to think of democracy as a feature of a particular kind of state. But if we adopt a developmental approach and think of democracy as an attribute of society, we can apply the concept to any kind of enduring social unit: religious orders, trade unions, housing associations, political parties, pressure groups, business firms and public agencies. Indeed, there is no reason why we should not apply it to households and families. The arrangements by which these various bodies are governed may not, in fact, be particularly democratic: think of the paterfamilias, the Pope, the Mafia boss, the union baron, the corporate mogul, the jumped-up bureaucrat or the authoritarian personality. The point is simply that it makes sense to ask of any social unit: How democratic is it? And what would have to happen to make it more (or less) democratic?

As this formulation suggests, democracy is most usefully thought of not as an exclusive quality that a system of decision-making either has completely or lacks completely. Rather, it is a matter of degree – of more or less, not all or nothing. How are we to judge where any given system lies on the continuum between the most perfect democracy and the most absolute autocracy? In any social unit, three dimensions of variation can be distinguished: the range of stakeholders whose interests are affected by its activities and who possess not only the right, but also the capacity and the

desire to shape the rules and decisions by which it is governed; the range of issues over which stakeholders are able to exert some influence, whether directly or via representatives, as the case may be; and on any given issue, the degree of influence they have on the outcome.

Of course, if democracy is multi-dimensional, it follows that social unit A may be more democratic than social unit B on one dimension and less democratic on another. Whether A is then more or less democratic than B in some overall sense is a matter for debate. There is no way of avoiding this. Consider the similar problem of deciding whether the quality of life in one city is better or worse than that in another when the quality of life depends on various factors – air pollution, traffic congestion, cultural amenities, the crime rate etc. – the relative importance of which is a matter of opinion.

If there is one sphere of social life where democracy remains conspicuously underdeveloped, it is world of business and finance. The 1970s saw a wave of attempts to establish more democratic forms of decision-making in workplaces, boardrooms and the corridors of power. But this upsurge had scarcely begun before it was snuffed out by the neo-liberal counter-revolution and now we are back to business as usual: market forces rule, shareholders are the dominant stakeholders and rival firms confront each other in a Hobbesian war to the death.

How can we revive progress towards economic democracy? This is too big a subject to pursue here. Suffice it to say that the contemporary division between “state” and “market” is a product of history, not part of the human condition. In pre-capitalist societies, economy and polity formed a seamless web presided over by emperors, kings or oligarchs. With the development of capitalism, two realms emerged. The traditional tasks of rulers – law-making, law-enforcement and warfare –

continued to be performed by the state, which retained a legal monopoly of the means of violence and remained the centre of authority and ceremony. The rulers of the other realm took charge of the “economy”, as it came to be called, arrogating to themselves the tasks of marshalling the workforce, developing new technologies, launching new products, investing capital funds and enlarging the scale of production.

After a long, hard slog with many setbacks and defeats on the way, some progress has been made in democratising the “state”. But the realm of private ownership, commodity production and market forces has proved stubbornly resistant to reform. As long as most people's material living standards remained modest, this state of affairs could be justified as the surest and most expeditious way of promoting economic growth and raising per capita income. But in an affluent society, where more may well mean worse – or at any rate no better – and where what matters to many of us is the quality of our lives and the satisfaction we get from our work, this old argument becomes ever less compelling and the case for extending the principle of self-government into “economic affairs” ever more urgent, for unlimited growth has demonstrably failed to make us any happier and has inflicted untold damage on our society and habitat.

■ *David Purdy is a member of Democratic Left Scotland and a regular contributor to Perspectives and other Left journals.*

## NOTES

- 1 For a retrospective review of Williams's ideas, see Michael Rustin, “The Long Revolution Revisited”, *Soundings* 35, Spring 2007, pp 16–30.
- 2 The image of the parabola is suggested and discussed at greater length by Colin Crouch (2000) *Coping with Post-Democracy* (London: Fabian Society).

*kratos* = power

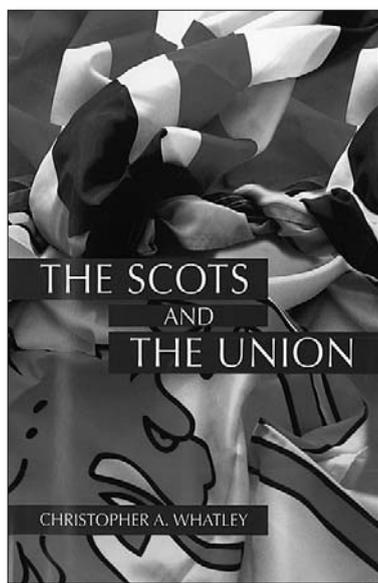
# "BOUGHT AND SOLD FOR ENGLISH GOLD"? AYE, RIGHT

**Davie Laing** is impressed by a history that challenges the cherished shibboleth that in 1707 a corrupt landed nobility sold out Scotland for thirty pieces of English silver.

As recently as April of this year a *Sunday Herald* correspondent re-cycled the time-honoured myth that in 1707 a corrupt landed nobility, representing 0.1% of the nation, had surrendered the ancient liberties of an independent, sovereign Scottish parliament in return for thirty pieces of English silver. If, in the future, this cherished shibboleth retains its hold on the Scottish imagination it will be despite the best efforts of Christopher Whatley and his *The Scots and the Union*.

Published to coincide with the 300th anniversary of the Union, the book is a major work of historical revisionism and henceforth our nationalist school of historians will have their work cut out, unless of course they do the decent thing and wave the white flag of surrender.

Not that they have ever had the field to themselves or even dominated historical discourse. Far from it, Christopher Smout (1969), Rosalind Mitchison (1970) and, more recently, Tom Devine in his magisterial *The Scottish Nation 1700–2000* (1999), have all voiced their scepticism as to the explanatory power of the “Parcel o’ Rogues” theory while not denying that the negotiations over the Union took place in an atmosphere pungent with the odour of venality. But never previously has the theory, with the benefit of new archival research into the political histories of Scottish parliamentari-



**The Scots and the Union**

by Christopher A. Whatley  
(Edinburgh University Press, £25.00)

ans, been subjected to such a barrage of scholarly artillery as that unleashed by Whatley and his research assistant, Derek Patrick.

It ought to be stressed that Whatley has more on his mind than the “Bought and Sold for English Gold” school of thought. Also in his sights are those historians who, in his view, have either neglected religion or economics (Whatley confesses his bafflement at the latter’s neglect) as causal factors motivating contemporaries or, in attempting to isolate one or another factor, have failed to grasp that the crisis leading up to the Union was, in his words, an “inter-locking” one and that the Scots were fully aware that they operated in the midst of something like a general crisis of the nation.

**THE POLITICS OF THE FEW**

Heading the list of Whatley’s dramatis personae is the Scottish landed elite, the Queensberrys, Argylls, Atholls and Hamiltons, a wealthy and privileged caste of men (mostly) who led the Scottish parliament in its negotiations with their English counterparts. However, the point about them is less their wealth and privilege than their culture and politics. This was a ruling class possessed of an increasingly spacious outlook: “anglicised” and therefore potentially treasonous to their hostile critics, British *and* Scottish with some notion of a common national good, to Whatley (and the present reviewer). Their models for modernising Scotland were the prosperous Dutch United Provinces and England.

As a result of their developing cosmopolitanism they were freer than most of their countrymen from the crippling Anglophobia that so constricted rational thought on Anglo-Scottish relations. (One might add that such toxic sentiments, spiced on England’s part with more than a dash of ethnic contempt, were returned in full by their southern neighbours.) As a result they were painfully aware of just how ill-equipped Scotland was to compete in international trade, increasingly acknowledged to be the royal road to the wealth of nations, in a world dominated by “fiscal/military” states bent on policies of militant economic nationalism. To take but two measures of Scotland’s poverty of resources and power: in the 1670s her p.a. revenue was £10,000 whereas England’s was £24m; in 1695 her maritime force consisted of three hulls all of them borrowed from and fitted out in England.

The horrific economic holocaust of the later 1690s (Whatley devotes an entire chapter to this) drove home the ugly facts of Scotland’s precarious economic situation. The result of successive harvest failure, the crisis, comparable in its severity to the better known Irish potato famine of the

1840s according to Whatley, resulted in Scotland's greatest ever mortality crisis. The decade ended with the miserable Darien disaster which cost the nation £103bn in modern values.

However, valuable lessons were drawn. The crisis made apparent, at least to those not blinded by anglophobia, just how chimerical and unenforceable was the claim to independence and sovereignty of the Scottish parliament, and the influential Sir John Clerk of Penicuik was not afraid to say so, albeit with a sigh.

Coinciding and "inter-locking" with Scotland's economic woes was religion and the national and international politics of religion at a time of resurgent Counter-Reformation. This took the shape of a potential French connection with Scottish Jacobitism whose hopes of overthrowing the Revolution settlement of 1688 were personified in the claims of the Catholic Stewart Pretender to the British throne. The stakes could hardly have been higher and are impossible to overstate. A Catholic restoration and the return of a Stewart dynasty would infallibly mean the extirpation of the Protestant religion, the supplanting of limited, contractual monarchy (practically a Scottish invention) with divine right, absolutist monarchy on the French model and property re-arrangements of some sort – in all likelihood Scotland and England reduced to the level of French client or satellite states.

Only England had the muscle at home and abroad to prevent such an eventuality and by the early 1700s she was overcoming the fastidiousness regarding Scottish overtures for a closer union that had been the main obstacle in the past. Faced by a sort of spasm of independent spirit from the Scottish parliament (the historic Declaration of Arbroath was published for the first time in 1689) and seriously deteriorating Anglo-Scottish relations at a time when England was embroiled in her "Second Hundred Years War" with

France, English parliamentarians at last came round to the view that only an "incorporating union" that swallowed the Scottish parliament would guarantee the Hanoverian Protestant succession and they were ready, if need be, to apply coercion in the shape of an Aliens Act that would strangle the Scottish economy. The Scottish and English elites were edging closer together for their own differing reasons and a deal of some kind was clearly on the cards though the precise terms remained to be negotiated.

Presbyterian divines with their deep-seated suspicions of English prelacy, and their mass following on the Edinburgh streets, remained the major obstacle. The "master-stroke", in Whatley's words, of the Act of Security that guaranteed the status of the nation's church reassured the divines, strengthened the hand of moderates and restored the streets of the nation's politically sensitive capital to a reasonable calm. At the same time, along with the Equivalent as compensation for losses incurred by Darien, a bribe according to some, helped to swing opinion in the "new party" and ensured a majority in parliament for the Treaty of Union.

In return for ceding a worthless sovereignty Scotland gained full admission to the English trading system (and the protection of the English navy on the high seas) with its promise of economic modernisation and ultimate prosperity, while retaining a sort of "semi-independence" in the form of autonomous religious, legal and educational regimes. The red-coats and their Lowland allies extinguished any lingering hopes of Counter-Reformation on Culloden Moor in 1746. The "Parcel o' Rogues" theory is not so much untruthful as unhelpful in shedding light on much more than the ideological preferences of nationalist historians.

#### **THE POLITICS OF THE MANY**

The making of the Union was the work of minorities but they made

#### **In return for ceding a worthless sovereignty Scotland gained full admission to the English trading system ...**

it in the presence of and subject to the influence of a "robust political culture" that extended from Edinburgh's Parliament Close to the wynds and closes of the nation's cities and assumed a variety of forms. From the failure of Darien, as much a patriotic as a financial venture, to the eve of the Union, the entire nation, "all ranks of society, even the meaner sort" according to Sir John Clerk, participated in an astonishing national debate on the future of the nation that may be without parallel in early modern Europe (more detailed consideration of this must await Karin Bowie's eagerly anticipated *Scottish Public Opinion and the Anglo-Scottish Union, 1699–1707*). The debate took place against a seething background of crowd politics that, since George Rudé famously mined French police records to illuminate the behaviour of the Parisian revolutionary crowd, historians have been less inclined to dismiss as an anarchic, mindless, undirected and destructive mob.

Of course the fury of the crowd could descend into the mob excesses of right-wing nightmares as crew members of the English "Worcester" (1705) and the unfortunate Captain Porteous (1736) were to discover to their cost. But what seems equally clear is that the crowd, sometimes "licensed" by local magistrates or opposition parliamentarians but more often by God, was consistently motivated by a popular national ideology. To give but one of many possible illustrations of this claim, the Edinburgh crowd erupted in fury in late 1706 on hearing the rumour that Scotland's royal regalia, the symbol of the nation's ancient claim to nationhood, was to be shipped south for melting.

Women of high estate and low were very much a part of this rough and ready democracy and among the appealing features of Whatley's book is the attention he devotes to their influence. The staunchly Presbyterian duchess of Hamilton is constantly at her son's elbow in an effort to stiffen his often weak-

ening resolve. At the other end of the social spectrum women feature prominently, often violently so, not only in food riots that might be categorised as “mere” extensions of the private sphere but in liberating supplies of tobacco, brandy and wool impounded by the hated excise officers. The English propagandist and spy, Daniel Defoe, was of the view that “the women were the Instructors and the Men mere Machines wound up”. But before we are tempted to the conclusion that early modern Scotland was a sort of Edenic paradise for assertive women, Whatley reminds us that while male capital offenders were hanged their female counterparts were drowned or strangled or pressed unto death; that the vast majority of victims of Scotland’s last ever witch-hunt were women; that no woman was allowed to be a signatory of any of the petitions or addresses that flooded the parliament in the years immediately prior to the union and, more mundanely but no less significantly, that Queen Anne suffered no fewer than 19 unsuccessful pregnancies in pursuit of an heir to the throne, enough surely to soften the heart of the flintiest republican.

As for the long-term benefits of the Union we may allow the last word to Christopher Whatley who concludes his essay in *History Scotland* “... for almost two centuries the Union worked to Scotland’s advantage, as indeed it did for most of the rest of the United Kingdom. Whether or not this is still the case, is a different matter.” Amen to that.

■ *Davie Laing is a retired communist and history teacher. He wishes to thank Lucy for her heroic efforts on his behalf.*

**NOTE**

\* *Bought and Sold for English Gold* is the title of his 1994 pamphlet on the subject which, along with a potted account of his argument in *History Scotland*, November/December 2006, the general reader may prefer to the more academic book.

# FEELBAD BRITAIN

There is a serious message in this book, and the authors are to be thanked for their research and the work they have done in bringing it to our attention. *Feelbad Britain* catalogues in a relentless manner what the authors see as the social malaise that underlay the final years of Blair’s Britain (and continues into Brown’s?).

They do this with copious statistics that would surprise even the most avid cuttings collector, no matter how thick their “bad news” folder. Having said this, it’s not an easy book to read, which is a pity, since there are some insights within it (especially the second half of the book), which are extremely interesting and certainly worth further debate and wider currency.

The book (it refers to itself as a pamphlet, but at 107 pages perhaps this is a misnomer) starts off with very large section (19 pages) dealing with the ills of life under New Labour. This is perhaps the hardest part of the book to get through, which is unfortunate since, like the title itself, it may act as a disincentive to go any further for all but the most dedicated politicians. It is hardest as it catalogues a series of depressing statistics which, if we are not careful, might send the average reader off in search of valium, rather than continuing to plough through in search of radical politics.

In this short review however I would like to concentrate on some very positive elements which gave me a lot of food for thought.

It catalogues well the continuing trajectory of Thatcherism which

has been at the heart of New Labour and exposes the threadbare nature of (the now former Home Secretary) John Reid’s anti-immigrant stance, by some trenchant facts, for instance:

“The strain placed on the health and education services by young hard-working Polish plumbers is unclear, whilst the impact on the Spanish health service of the emigration of elderly British citizens to southern Spain is well documented.” (p13)

**INTERESTING CONCEPTS**

Some interesting concepts are introduced – the idea of a “free-floating anxiety” that the authors argue has been brought about by the constant worry over disasters real or imagined – the “war on terror”, global warming and the like. It is unfortunate that this is given the jargon-laden term “ontological insecurity” (indeed this is the title for chapter 3 – not an inviting read for the uninitiated). Another very useful notion which is raised is that of the “great forgetting”, referring to the way progressive aspects of history are constantly written out of historical narrative of our times or recent past, as presented by much of the media. The authors criticise the concept of “market utopianism” within the book, describing the impossible attempt by neo-liberals to create a “fully self-adjusting market” and they introduce sociologist Michael Burawoy’s conceptualisation of capitalism which, in his view, rather than creating its own grave diggers, as Marx

believed, “generates a society that acts as a kind of social shock absorber, tempering its inherently destructive effects.” Struggle takes place over the ways in which this defensive reaction occurs, the struggle for socialism being a longer term political project not just to make the best of a bad job but, rather, to subordinate the economy to society, what the authors believe should be a “self-regulating society”. This needs the extension of democracy and the involvement of everyone in making decisions, to every area of our lives. The authors use this approach to bring in the ideas of Gramsci, in particular his insights regarding the building of a historic bloc to resolve the crisis in favour of the many and not the few.

There are many other useful concepts revisited in the book, but rather than its critique of the failings of the present neo-liberal project, I actually found its most useful aspects to be its presentations of alternative visions of society – its insights into what it calls “convergent global development”, its treatment of the issue of social ownership and of citizens’ income, even its treatment of the complexity of being young in Blair’s Britain, and on that alone, I would commend its readership.

#### **IMPORTANT MESSAGES**

There were several difficulties I had with the book however, which I hope the authors might consider in looking at how its contents can be popularised. Firstly I’m not sure the authors have really considered who the target readership is. Some parts are written in a very academic style, although I imagine it’s not aimed specifically at academics. Apart from “ontological insecurity”, as early as page 3 we are looking at “the ossification of social relations”, while by page 34 we are dealing with “assiduous promulgation”. This weakens what are important messages within the book. Other parts of the book from time to time unfortunately sound like the type of treatise that the so called revolutionary left were fond

**The authors use this approach to bring in the ideas of Gramsci ... regarding the building of a historic bloc to resolve the crisis in favour of the many and not the few.**

**Feelbad Britain – a view from the democratic left**

by Pat Devine, Andy Pearmain, Michael Prior and David Purdy (see final paragraph of review for details of how to obtain a copy)

of producing in the past (and may still do today) e.g. “We make no apology for proceeding next to questions of social theory rather than proposing concrete policies. We shall come to these.” (p20). Again I wondered what sort of readership would be attracted to this type of narrative. Of course, this could all be changed in a popularised version, and I hope will be.

#### **GAPS OR SILENCES**

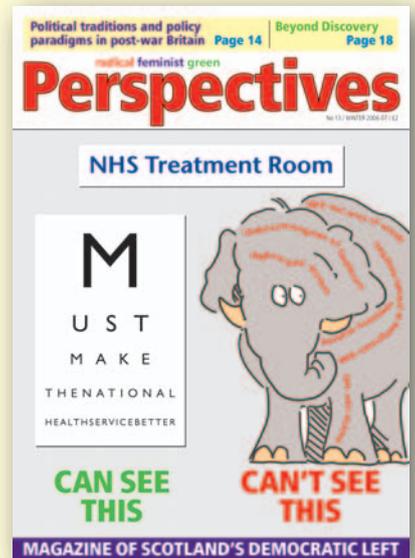
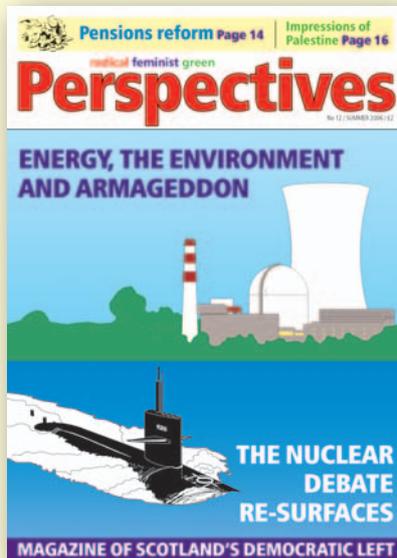
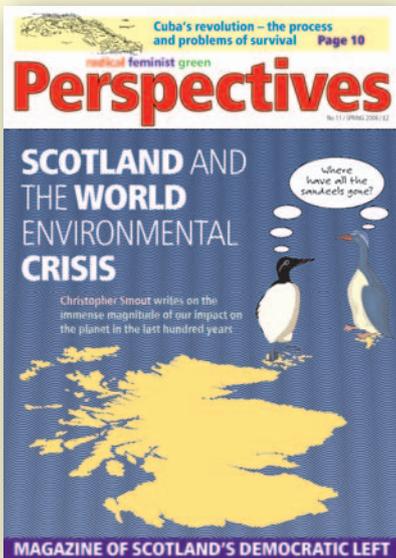
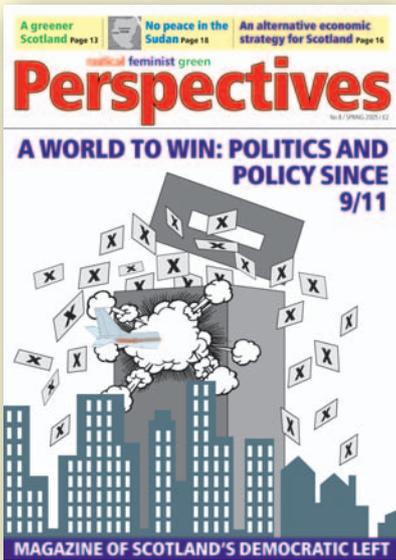
Where I had real difficulties, however, were with the gaps or silences in the book. The word feminism appears once – and in a very critical manner, criticising the current of separatism that deemed “every man a potential rapist”. Women’s liberation is mentioned once (praising its “constructive demands in earlier phases”), but the vision offered by the type of “democratic left” alternative the authors promote argues for a “combination of the characteristic socialist belief in equality and human solidarity with the civic republican ideals of positive freedom and democratic self-government and the green commitment to sustainable development and post-materialism.” This rather sounds like “Radical, Feminist, Green”, without the Feminist. This is not to say that the authors ignore issues of “personal politics” – on the contrary, they deal in a very interesting and insightful way with issues of childhood, the family, and the work-life balance. They even talk about the “sex abuse moral panic”, and highlight the contradiction between the officially sanctioned push for “good parenting” and men’s greater involvement in society, with “populist suspicion directed against any man who has contact with children other than his own blood offspring”. Their conclusion however that this is “not an isolated social issue but is at one with the other problems discussed here and springs from the same source” (presumably neo-liberal capitalism), I think fails to name and fully explore the issue of male power (and its abuse).

Finally, I was disappointed at what I believe to be a “metrocentric” outlook which weakens the book considerably. The book’s sub-title, “a view from the democratic left”, at first made me think it was emanating from Democratic Left Scotland (one of its authors is a prominent member) which I presume is mistaken – democratic left in this case perhaps referring to the way those around the “Compass” elements within and outside of the Labour Party are now referring to themselves.

#### **NATIONAL QUESTION ABSENT**

I think this reflects in the way the national question is almost totally absent. Thus the word “Welsh” appears once, as does “Irish”. “Scottish” appears three times, with “Scotland” appearing four times. In general, despite a few (albeit very positive) acknowledgments of Scotland’s achievements under devolution, the situation in Scotland is referred to in a manner that can be perceived to be quite dismissive i.e. as being “a very distinctive political climate quite unlike the rest of the UK.” Hmm, I’m not satisfied with that. The very detailed and insightful Gramscian analysis offered elsewhere in the book is missing here. Nationalism (like feminism) does not seem to feature in the analytical standpoint used which again really needs to be addressed. Unfortunately this perspective does permeate through most of the treatment of politics with a capital P – the Party system referred to is with few exceptions the Westminster party system, the approach to New Labour (and alternatives to it) is to British New Labour, with consequent silences on much of the specificity of politics and the political party environment in Scotland and Wales.

Having said that, I would urge a wide readership of this book – which can be downloaded free as a pdf from [www.hegemonics.co.uk/](http://www.hegemonics.co.uk/) or ordered as a book from [www.lulu.com](http://www.lulu.com)  
**Doug Chalmers**



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