

Katie Bonnar: attainment gap won't close without determined anti-poverty action

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Scotland's 'National Conversation':

WE NEED TO TALK ABOUT...

PHOTO: Craig Maclean

POVERTY

end low pay and
zero hours – £10/hr
minimum wage
for all, NOW

HOUSING

build 150,000
affordable social
homes to rent

GREEN ENERGY

harness our
resources for
people and planet
– not profit

PRIVATE PROFIT

nationalise
railways, energy,
and essential
services

TRIDENT

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– no to NATO

WELFARE

stop benefit
sanction
harassment – sack
ATOS & CAPITA



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The Scottish Government's welfare 'conversation' needs to be two-way

by Sandra Webster

LAST WEEK the SNP called for a conversation with Scotland. For those of us who called for such a debate during the referendum this is nothing new. The SNP conversation is nothing but a number of questions where you can respond yes or no. Quite one sided.

However after The Smith Commission, difficult powers have been given to the Scottish Government. Time to look at how the Scottish Government should use these for the better good and for us on the left to have a two way conversation.

The Smith Commission gave difficult benefit decisions to make to the Scottish Government. These include disability and carers benefits, benefit sanctions which are the scourge of many communities.

SNP: left of centre?

Difficult decisions have to be made. For the SNP government they can no longer protest to be left of centre.

This is their opportunity to show how different Scotland could be and indeed should be. They have to "hold the door" and protect folk from the Tories policies which we know will only worsen. For many people with disabilities, and those who

DON'T PASS ON TORY AUSTERITY:
the SNP should protect folk from Tory policies, which we know will only worsen

(PHOTO: Simon Whittle)



care for them, the dreaded ATOS and CAPITA assessments cause so much fear. People with disabilities are being perceived as scroungers. If you can walk from the car park or you go alone—you're fit for work.

'Michelle' spoke to me of her experience: "I have spina bifida and have received DLA since I was a wee girl. I rely on my car to get out. The assessment was terrible. I went alone and didn't know what to say. The PIP assessment made me feel vulnerable. I was only awarded low rate PIP so could have lost my car. Thankfully I was allowed to keep it until my appeal which I won. This process is dehumanising."

Would it not be better to read reports from individual's own

doctors rather than the assessment of professionals who have no knowledge of an individual's need? Such a system based on an individual's need would put less people in stressful situations.

Despite the Carer's Bill being praised, this is a piece of paper without any teeth. Carers continue to be paid lip service too and the new social care powers have little impact on carers lives.

The SNP propose to raise Carer's Allowance to £75 per week, but for those who provide health care for much more than the working time directive, this will change nothing. Carers deserve a living wage like other workers.

Workers are seeing a cut in working tax credits which groups such as The Child Poverty Action Group and the poverty alliance. Low paid work is not the answer but a living wage is. In the meantime those in poorly paid work should not have to fear Universal Credit and a demand to seek more hours. This impacts mostly on single parents and people with disabilities. No change since Thatcher then.

I live in the town in the west coast which dishes out the most benefit sanctions. It is time to end

this policy where being a few minutes late, or having to miss an appointment means your benefit is cut. A friend, Michael, had his benefit reduced to £50-a-week. How is anyone supposed to survive on this? We need an end to benefit sanctions.

The Scottish Government are having public meetings to consult on benefit changes. One plan is a Scottish social security system. Language is important but what matters most is a change in how we view the welfare state.

Tory food stamps

For socialists, it means a safety net for all. One of the questions in the Scottish Government's review is should we use goods or money to give to claimants. This is exactly the attitude of the Tories who want to give cards to buy food. Another step closer to food stamps. This is a challenge for the SNP—we need actions more than words, to show how different Scotland can be.

The SSP will be contributing to the consultation on benefits but I would urge you to send the Scottish Government your personal perspectives as well.

Bread and roses is not too much to ask. Neither is a kinder, fairer Scotland.

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National discussion must consider issues facing working class majority

by Ken Ferguson

FIRST MINISTER Sturgeon's "summer independence offensive"—in fact launched on the first official day of autumn in the leafy surroundings of Stirling University—was not so much a call to arms as the latest example of the growing uncertainty surrounding the details of when a second referendum might happen.

In what has been a political hothouse since the Brexit vote in June the question of indyref 2 has taken on a mercurial quality now a certainty, then a prospect, to be held before Brexit only to be held when the terms are known etc.

The issue is now set in a swirling fog of uncertainty and confusion with politicians, commentators and pollsters all offering a wide range of opinions and predictions.

All this has one clear origin and it is that Brexit was not in the game plan of the SNP government re-elected a few weeks before it happened clearly focused on a gradualist caution on a second referendum qualified only by the famous "material change" clause.

Then 24 June delivered the material change and, despite winning praise for her sure footed response in reality Nicola Sturgeon was just as surprised as the majority of the political class in both Scotland and the UK.

The indy factor

Declarations about a second referendum being "on the table" in the days after Brexit upped the ante and played well at least initially with SNP members and the wider Yes camp.

However as the weeks have passed, it is increasingly clear that for the Scottish Government, dealing with Brexit and its consequences are the top priority with indyref 2 as a factor in this process rather than the central issue.

So we have had expert committees formed, flights to Brussels to meet EU leaders, votes for cross party campaign to keep Scotland's EU links and a plethora of academic and political opinions on how this might be done.

Two dangers flow from this process which the independence movement more generally and the radical and left forces



STANDING UP FOR...? for the Scottish Government, dealing with Brexit and its consequences are the top priority, with indyref 2 as a factor in this process rather than the central issue (PHOTO: Craig Maclean)

within it must guard against. Firstly there is a growing tendency to put Scotland's relationship with the EU at the heart of all politics as for example in response to the GERS deficit and this can easily slip into a position which offers as "Brexit bad, EU good" story which is at best simplistic.

On Brexit, sections of the left, such as the SSP, supported a critical Remain vote which argued that there was much to criticise in the EU but a No vote would deliver a victory to the hard right as has proved to be the case.

However it would be a serious mistake to believe that those rejecting the far right May cabinet installed after Cameron's demise can find a socially just and progressive alternative in today's EU which only last year crushed Greece and is a standard bearer for free market neoliberalism.

Of course, gains on workers' rights and environmental protection must be defended but equally the EU needs to change in favour of people over profit if it is to play a progressive role in a world dominated by big capital.

Secondly there is the key question of how any second indyref—whatever its timing—can be won and the road opened up for radical change. Shaping such a campaign will need to take as a starting point the reasons for failure in 2014 and

reshape the campaign with a clear emphasis on winning over Scotland's working class majority by focusing clearly on the issues of jobs, wages pensions and the economy which were key drivers of the 2014 No vote.

This clearly entails making a case for both breaking with the British state and with the mainstream failed economics of the last 30 years supported by mainstream politicians including the SNP.

Dodging billions in tax

Scandals such as the PFI rip-off, private profiteers running railways and a tax regime which allows giant corporations to dodge billions in tax must end.

What is needed is real independence both political and economic which not only meets the democratic demand for independence but opens the way to using that independence to serve the needs of the majority not the wealthy few.

Such a campaign based on the need for full trade union rights, £10-an-hour wages, ending privatisation, building homes for rent and so on can make a powerful case for a Yes vote not to change flags and emblems but to open the way to a radically different Scotland putting people and planet rather than profit as its key priority.

Scotland's gender pay gap at 28%

by Jenni Gunn

RESEARCH CONDUCTED by the Institute of Fiscal Studies has found that the gender pay gap stands at around 18 per cent across the UK, with the average in Scotland currently standing at a staggering 29 per cent.

Although the 18 per cent figure is an improvement on figures from recent years, the research also uncovered that women at work are suffering a “motherhood penalty”—the gender pay gap widens markedly for women in the 12 years after having their first child.

According to the research, the situation is worst for graduates and women with A-levels who experience a gender pay gap that is essentially the same as it was two decades ago.

The report found that the “wage penalty for taking time out of paid work is greater for more highly educated women” rising 4 per cent each year a woman takes out of paid work. Opportunities for promotion and progression decrease dramatically once returning to work after having a child.

Even though women are participating in formalised education more than ever, this isn't translating into pay parity or into equality of opportunity for women entering the labour market.

No choice in a vacuum

For those women without formal qualifications, the gap doesn't appear to be quite so punishing; owing simply to the fact that women in lower paid employment have fewer opportunities for wage progression and promotion to miss out on in the first place.

Since the report has been circulated on social media, there have been attempts by many to argue that these statistics prove that sexism in the workplace is no longer an issue—this gap doesn't exist because of inherent sexism within the system, but because of the choices women make.

Hey, if you want to have a baby and take time out to do that, that's a woman's prerogative. If you want to have a kid and can only afford to be in part-time work, that's your choice. You can't complain if women choose to work in lower paid industries, right? Right?

Wrong. Choice does not exist in a vacuum. This is a manifestation of a deeply



WORK TO BE DONE: even though more women are participating in formalised education, this isn't translating into pay parity or equality of opportunity

entrenched idea that women should shoulder the primary responsibility as caregivers, whether that means caring for children or sick or elderly relatives.

This burden continues to lie disproportionately on the shoulders of women. Gender norms that are imposed on women (and men) from a young age mean that women's employment continues to be highly concentrated in undervalued, low-paid sectors.

Retail and care work are salient examples of what is still considered to be “women's work,” women still make up the majority of the workforce. The lack of quality part-time and flexible jobs is stopping women from achieving pay parity.

These aren't choices—for many women it's the only employment they are able to get whilst balancing care responsibilities and the lion's share of unpaid domestic labour in the home.

Childcare is a major issue; many women are only able to work part-time after the birth of a child due in part to the exorbitant cost of childcare. A system of universally free, high-quality childcare would go some way in levelling the field for women in the workplace.

Childcare should also become more flexible in order to fit with the working patterns of parents. In addition, we need to pressure employers to institute more flexibility at work to make childcare more manageable.

It is essential that we push for a major cultural shift too, where fathering is encouraged and caring for children is no longer

considered to be the sole duty of women. The guilt that many women experience when returning to work after the birth of a child speaks to the pressure within society to conform to traditional gender roles of “mother”. Whilst attitudes may be slowly changing, statistics show that women are still bearing the brunt of childcare responsibilities.

By allowing men and women to adopt flexible working patterns, and allowing and encouraging men to take paternity leave, we will hopefully bring about the change in cultural norms that will bring us closer not only to pay parity but a more equal view of women's place in the home. Not to mention the workplace and in society as a whole.

And we need to raise women's wages—because this will benefit everyone.

Keep up the pressure

Over 63 per cent of those earning less than the living wage are women. We need ensure that the sectors in which women traditionally dominate the work force are valued as socially and economically equal to those sectors dominated by men. This is good for everyone across the sector, but is particularly good for women.

To this end, we need to keep up the pressure on employers to pay the £10-an-hour living wage. It will have a massive impact on the lowest earners, and dramatically change the lives of those women who are most vulnerable to low-paid employment and poverty.

Arab awakening becoming Arab nightmare

The Age of Jihad: Islamic State and the Great War for the Middle East by Patrick Cockburn, Verso, £14.99

by Colin Fox

DESCRIBED BY Seymour Hersh as 'the best western journalist at work in the Middle East today' Patrick Cockburn's latest book charts the continuing conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Libya, Bahrain and the Yemen and underlines why he merits such an accolade.

The Age of Jihad is both an invaluable reference for anyone seeking to understand the complex and often horrific events unfolding in the region and a devastating indictment of Western foreign policy over decades.

Born in Cork and educated privately at Glenalmond College in Perthshire Cockburn comes from a family of reporters. His father was the acclaimed communist writer Claud Cockburn, his journalist brother the late Alexander Cockburn and his niece the former BBC Economics Editor Stephanie Flanders.

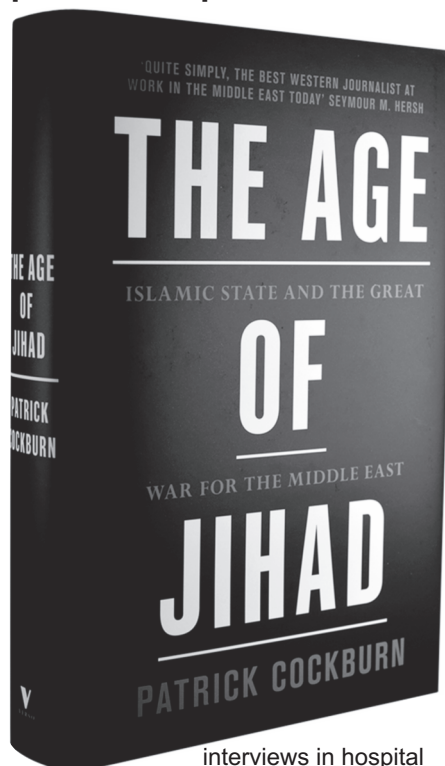
His knowledge of the Islamic State is without peer in the English speaking world. 'Patrick Cockburn spotted the emergence of ISIS much earlier than anybody else and wrote about it with a depth of understanding that was just in a league of its own' concluded the judges awarding him the Foreign Affairs Journalist of the year title in 2014.

Vital context

'It is difficult to find many optimists in Baghdad' he writes with characteristic understatement about the politics of Iraq. And he reaches the same gloomy conclusion about the prospects for millions more in Syria, Libya, Afghanistan, Bahrain and the Yemen. Cockburn has recorded the deteriorating conditions of life there over the past 13 years but unlike others he offers vital context and an acute historical perspective to explain them. 'An Islamic cult motivates people so they are prepared to die for it in a way that is no longer true of nationalism or socialism. There is outrage at the Caliphate as its militants blow up the ancient buildings of Palmyra and cut off the head of the chief

archaeologist. But as yet there is no sustained counter-attack to eliminate the Islamic state.'

And yet he is quick to explain this was not always so. Two decades ago such barbaric religious divisions were rare. Secular regimes were the norm, albeit with ruthless 'strongmen' like Saddam, Gaddafi or Assad at the helm. Time and again Cockburn's witnesses testify wistfully that 'Things were very bad under Saddam/Assad/The Taliban [insert relevant tyrant] but things are ten times worse now'. Take the testimony of 'Faraj' [not his real name] whom Cockburn



interviews in hospital in Syria 'At first we dreamed of having a revolution and gaining our liberty' he recalls 'but unfortunately the popular movement was not well organised and it was manipulated by neighbouring countries such as the Gulf states, who turned it into jihad.'

Secular societies have been reduced to rubble by a mixture of US imperialism, sectarian civil wars, religious fanaticism and regime savagery.

Muhammed Karzai is disparagingly referred to as 'the mayor of Kabul' because his 'power' barely reaches the city limits. The Iraqi PM Haider al-Abadi is considered equally impotent as the country is 'Cantonised' into 3 separate states and facing impending civil war.

But it is the Libyan 'failed state' which receives Cockburn's most chilling verdict. 'Libya is falling apart' he concludes. 'If the real objective of the war was to replace Gaddafi with a secular democracy, it is absurd that the West's regional allies in the conflict should have been theocratic absolute monarchies in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf. Western intervention has reduced a country that had been peaceful for 50 years to a level of violence approaching Syria and Iraq.'

Where the West and its client states did not ignite the conflict they fuelled its barbarity. The Syrian civil war is a 5 fold conflict involving a popular uprising against Assad, a sectarian battle between Sunni and Shia, another between Sunni, Shia and Kurds, a struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran and another Cold war between the USA and Vladimir Putin's Russia.

Slide to barbarism

That the Middle East is sliding towards barbarism is not in doubt.

The question is who benefits from this political stasis? Certainly Israel gains from the bitter divisions of its foes. Russia too benefits through its influence in Syria bolstering Assad.

Among the losers however is Turkey 'with its vision of a new Ottoman Empire now gone with the wind'. Saudi Arabia too, with its medieval 'Wahibi' fundamentalism, is losing what little international tolerance it had left. And the US with its once hegemonic influence markedly waning is clearly another loser. But above all it is the millions of ordinary Arabs, Kurds and Afghans desperately trying to survive amid the grotesque political corruption, economic privations and blood-curdling sectarian depravity all around them who stand to lose most.

Ultimately this book poses more questions than it answers. And that is a good thing for Cockburn is a reporter not a polemicist. He avoids the grotesque errors of his colleagues who may highlight the problems but reach dreadfully poor conclusions about what needs to be done beyond pious pleas for 'compromise' and utopian homilies they probably learned at Glenalmond.

Demand public ownership

by *Richie Venton, SSP national workplace organiser*

THE BATTLE to ensure public safety and job security on Scotland's railways continues, and the Scottish Socialist Party is determined to play its part alongside the rail workers' unions and passengers. As the *Voice* went to press, the RMT held a demo outside the Scottish Parliament and a series of public meetings on the issue.

The prolonged talks between ScotRail Abellio bosses and the two railway unions—RMT and ASLEF—have yet to reach an acceptable agreement on keeping the guards. Many workers are furious at the bosses' stalling tactics, and are willing to resume strike action if they don't rapidly offer an acceptable package that puts guards not drivers—who should be left to drive—at the heart of train dispatch procedures, as demanded jointly by the RMT and ASLEF.

Every event surrounding these issues proves that the plague of privatisation and profiteering is totally incompatible with public safety and people's jobs being secured.

Plague of privatisation

Perhaps the worst current example of how profit threatens safety and rips asunder public services is that of Southern railways—the busiest lines in the whole UK.

Under privatisation, French-owned Govia has the franchise, and has caused absolute mayhem and meltdown for passengers, whilst treating their staff like slaves to be punished for daring to stand up for public safety.

When train drivers took industrial action to stop the company breaching safety agreements, they grabbed £250,000 from ASLEF through the courts, seized drivers' mobile phones to gather evidence on industrial action, and removed their travel concessions.

Hot on the heels of this, the same bosses have tried to bypass the RMT to enforce Driver Only trains—and this week the same company announced a phenomenal 27 per cent rise in their profits—to £99.8million for the year up to July.

Anticipating public anger on their profiteering chief executive, David Brown, has waived his annual bonus and this year's salary increase. However we should add he

took home a humble £2.16million last year! Meanwhile Govia's political puppeteers—the Tory government—made their very own announcement regarding Southern railways... literally the day before.

They declared that £20million of taxpayers' money was to be taken from government-run Network Rail's budget and gifted to Govia-run Southern railways! Another example of workers and passengers bailing out the profiteers. Reward for failure; proping up the profiteers at public expense.

This capitalist chaos on the railways applies across the UK, including Scotland. And all the pro-business, mainstream political parties prefer and perpetrate this profit-driven chaos; the Tories, Lib Dems, Labour and indeed the SNP.



The roots of current battles to keep safety critical guards on our trains, and to stop cuts to station staff, ticket offices, signalling and track maintenance, go back to the McNulty Report of May 2011.

Titled Rail Value for Money Study it was commissioned by the Labour government but published and enthusiastically embraced by the subsequent Tory/Lib Dem Coalition.

As the late socialist RMT leader Bob Crow wrote at the time, "The basic message of the McNulty report is that rail workers and passengers are being asked to pay the price of privatisation. The multitude of private competing interests who make up our fragmented industry are not only let off the hook, but are given even more powers based on the same crackpot ideology that led to the original privatisation."

Sir Roy McNulty ignored the damning evidence against privatisation that his own study unearthed.

For instance, that privatisation had massively escalated costs of running the network, requiring three times as much public subsidy as under previous nationalisation; costing three times as much to run; being 30 per cent less efficient than the railways in other European countries.

In large measure because the latter are mostly state owned, and don't suffer the plague of scores of competing profiteers, each requiring their own dividend payouts and chaotic lack of coordination—with a whole system of fines and incentive payments that are often contradictory.

With train operators (TOCs) vying with rolling stock providers (ROSCOs) which lease them the trains, and a myriad system of payments between Network Rail and these, money ripped out of the labour of rail workers and fares has poured into the coffers of numerous franchise-holders.

Annual waste of £1.2bn

In 2011, an RMT-commissioned study showed that £1.2billion a year was wasted this way. That could have been invested in track maintenance; new rolling stock; longer, faster and greener trains to match the rocketing number of passengers; safe, friendly, fully-staffed stations and ticket offices; and extension of safety-critical guards on every single train in the land.

But that would have required coordination, rational planning, and a system driven by public need not private greed; it would need renationalisation of the entire railway network, with a democratic system of working class control and management.

Instead of that, we've suffered the consequences of privatisation before and since the McNulty report—a document which scorned the option of an integrated public rail network, and instead made many of the proposals for savage cuts and assaults on safety that are being rammed through right now.

Passenger numbers have rocketed since the mid-1990s. In Scotland, passenger journeys have exploded by 35 per cent in the last 10 years, to 93 million a year. But rolling stock has lagged drastically behind the booming numbers of passengers. For instance, a recent report showed only one new seat on Scotland's trains for every 3,300 extra passenger journeys over 10 years!

for public safety

SUPPORT THE GUARDS:
the SSP calls for every
one of the current 600
guards' posts to be
retained, undiluted, with
full control of train
dispatch and demand
that it be extended to a
guard on EVERY train



Fares have leapt up to the dearest in Europe—30 per cent higher than the average in Sweden, France, Switzerland and Holland (homeland of Abellio!), for instance.

The McNulty plan for savage cuts earmarked 35 per cent of all 'savings' to come through staff cuts. And the government and train profiteers have gone about this business like demented axemen, with rampant closure of ticket offices, cuts to station staff, reduction of infrastructure and maintenance crews, and concerted removal of guards—one thing the rival train companies certainly agree on and coordinate their plans for.

Passengers suffer

In the case of Scotland, successive franchise-holders—First Group and Abellio—have been hellbent on extending Driver Only Operations (DOO). In this they are carrying out the explicit aims of the McNulty report to the letter:

"The default position for all services on the UK rail network should be DOO, with a second member of train crew only being provided where there is a commercial, technical or other imperative" (McNulty, May 2011).

But McNulty was a Westminster plan, initiated by New Labour, pursued by the Coalition and Tory governments.

However, transport is a devolved issue in Scotland, with control in the hands of the Holyrood government—the SNP government, elected on claims to be anti-austerity and to be 'Stronger for Scotland'.

Which Scotland?! The Scotland of Scot Rail workers and working class people re-

lying on a cheap, integrated, safe rail service? No, by their deeds, the SNP have imitated the actions of other pro-big business parties when it comes to the railways.

As far back as May 2012, under Alex Salmond's government, the Scottish parliament's Infrastructure and Capital Investment Committee left us in no doubt about their intentions.

They stated, in black and white: "We heard ideas that Transport Scotland could use to ensure that efficiency savings recommended in the McNulty Report are realised... Passengers care little about how the franchise is run... paving the way towards meeting the targets recommended by the McNulty Review..."

So instead of using the powers already devolved to set a clear, inspiring example of what Scottish independence could deliver regarding rail services, the SNP grabbed onto the poisoned plans of McNulty and sought to implement them.

Of course some welcome investment and improvements have been implemented. But not a finger has been lifted by the SNP to remove the profit motive from the service, despite all the evidence in favour of public ownership that McNulty's research inadvertently provided.

Instead of ScotRail being taken into Scottish government control in 2014, the SNP handed it over to Dutch government control, via the Dutch state-owned Abellio. And as demanded by McNulty, the Transport Scotland arm of the SNP government insisted on extension of DOO as a clause in the franchise awarded to Abellio. It's the hand of SNP government that lurks be-

hind the cost-cutting crusade to get rid of guards, regardless of the cost to public safety. It's only the courageous strike action by the same guards that has stayed their hands.

During the RMT strikes, the government and Abellio were quick to repeat that 57 per cent of ScotRail trains are already DOO. But whilst there are 600 guards on the minority share of trains, there are only 300 Ticket Examiners employed to staff the 57 per cent!

Monitoring by drivers in recent months proves at least 20 per cent of DOO trains run without even a second crew member—with all the horrendous potential safety consequences.

Alongside that, by the SNP government's own admission, 70 per cent of all Scotland's stations are totally unstaffed. That's a factor behind several heartbreaking incidents of disabled people being left stranded on the station at night, with no station staff, or guard, or Ticket Examiner to help them.

The SSP strongly supports the rail unions' campaigns to ensure safe trains. We call for every one of the current 600 guards' posts to be retained, undiluted, with full control of train dispatch and demand that it be extended to a guard on EVERY train.

The SSP's track record

We want every station to be staffed, with a ticket office, and provision for passenger comfort and safety.

We call for full investment in infrastructure and maintenance.

And the SSP goes even further, to campaign for an integrated, fare-free public transport system, a measure to combat poverty and pollution, a policy that would generate vast numbers of new and skilled jobs for this and future generations.

Railworkers and passengers alike should study the track record of the pro-capitalist parties in contrast with that of Scotland's socialist party, the SSP.

The first set stands up for profit through privatisation, with safety consequences, and rampant waste to the public purse.

In contrast, the SSP campaigns for democratic public ownership of our railways and wider transport services, to ensure investment in people's needs and safety—as part of the broader aims we share with the RMT union Rule Book, which declares, "for the supersession of the capitalist system by a socialistic order of society".

Join us in that struggle.

Scotland's media needs real radical action to win back public confidence

says Paul Holleran,
Scottish Organiser NUJ

THERE ARE many people across Scotland who are totally sceptical about the "mainstream media" with academic surveys in recent years which show a serious mistrust of journalists.

One such investigation into the plummeting relationship between the public and media instigated a two year project by University of Edinburgh Law School. As part of a diverse team of individuals I was hopeful of the project delivering an extensive report that could provide a set of solutions which could turn around the downward spiral of the fourth estate.

However it never happened for various reasons and the search continues for some of us with a view to protecting and restoring an essential element of a functioning democracy.

Without stating the bleeding obvious that it is a tough time for print journalism, there needs to be wider recognition that newspapers do many things that can't be replaced.

Or at least they should and could do things if newsrooms were properly resourced.

As jobs continue to be slashed year on year, there is less time for investigative

journalism and court and council reporting, which are life blood issues for communities.

What is happening at local authority level and in our courts is about public awareness and accountability. However many newspapers and media organisations are not delivering in this field anymore and this undermines local democracy.

Democracy requires an informed public. No governing body, private company or public service organisation should think they are free of scrutiny by the press, as it goes without saying, accountability would diminish and vanish with all the follow-on implications.

An essential aspect of this ongoing crisis and public disengagement, is the reduction in the ability of the media to expose people to varying opinions or views contrary to their own.

Solutions to explore

It would be wrong to suggest the media give equal or even proportional representation to all opinions and many people use that as an excuse or reason for not reading a newspaper or watching television news.

Maybe that is one of the solutions we need to explore, with current owners taking cognisance of the public need

and demand for better balanced news and current affairs coverage.

The hiring or retaining of quality reporters, writers and sub-editors would be an obvious solution for me and present and future members of the NUJ and that is top of our agenda.

As national and local papers continue to come under pressure to attract advertisers and subscribers it is not good enough to continue on the current road. The very future of some titles and newspaper groups are at risk following Brexit, which has accelerated the decline in various ways.

The price of newsprint has soared since the EU referendum, pension scheme deficits are raising their ugly heads again and share prices have dropped worryingly in recent weeks.

The state of the industry and reasons for decline are complex but the dialogue on how restore a healthy press and media in Scotland needs to be stepped up. Newspapers should be recognised as community assets and where they are at risk of closure or not capable of delivering for the public, they should be taken into ownership in co-operative form.

The NUJ will be holding a conference before the end of the year to step up the level of engagement and increase meaningful discussion on how we as a country can save its indigenous press and go some way to enhancing our democracy as we look to an uncertain future.

The fight also continues for a better resourced BBC Scotland. There is a complacency within certain circles of senior management at Pacific Quay, that borders on delusional,

although there is a real opportunity to turn that around.

In recent years results from public and internal surveys which show a lack of satisfaction from those who watch the news and entertainment and also those who deliver it have been largely ignored with little action taken.

Demonstrations outside Pacific Quay along with non-stop campaigning on social media highlighted the complaints of a certain section of the public. However the wider discontent appears to have been ignored or minimised until now.

The question is what are they going to do about it?

Licence fee

An impressive business plan for the expansion of BBC Scotland was submitted in 2015 by a management team set up to turn things around.

It was then scandalously kicked into the long grass, with top brass in London blaming the latest politically driven bad licence fee settlement.

The NUJ campaign supporting the 2015 business plan was backed by cross-party support and pressure at Holyrood and Westminster has continued.

Maybe the joint demands of the unions, politicians and most importantly the public will now have the desired effect and persuade Tony Hall and his team to throw their weight behind that original plan.

Maybe they will see that the Scottish public demand more for their licence fees in the shape of more qualitative and quantitative news and current affairs, as well as vastly more drama and music originated in Scotland for Scots and for the rest of the world.



Join the SSP

Fill in this form and send it to: Scottish Socialist Party, Suite 370, 4th Floor, Central Chambers, 93 Hope St, Glasgow G2 6LD. Or phone: 07810205747. Or join the SSP online: scottishsocialistparty.org/join-us

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Life of a child growing up in poverty

by Katie Bonnar,
SSP co-spokesperson

THE RECENT government survey on multiple deprivation has again highlighted the issue of child poverty something that has been around since Victorian times.

When we consider the Victorians, many of us will conjure up images of poor children like *Oliver Twist*, growing up in abject poverty and condemned to a life of drudgery.

Thankfully, the 21st century brought with it the ideas of state intervention, technology and medicine along with basic rights in the workplace. It is therefore disturbing to think that for some children, the Victorian era does not feel like a distant memory and in fact is more reflective of their life today.

It is estimated that one in four children in Britain are living in poverty. This statistic increases for areas in Glasgow or even the recently named poorest area in Scotland, Ferguslie Park where one in three children are living in poverty.

Life chances

These statistics should not come as a surprise as they have been widely reported, however, it is important that we understand what this means practically for these children. How does it impact their life chances?

As a teacher, unsurprisingly, my focus is the relationship between education and child poverty. A good quality education can hugely improve a child's chances in life.

Leaving school with good exam results is not the be all and end all but it can lead to more positive destinations after schools, such as further education or better job prospects. For children growing up in poverty, they are significantly less likely to achieve good exam results — which reduces



DISTURBING: one in four children in Britain live in poverty
(PHOTO: Simon Whittle)

their chances of escaping poverty when they grow up.

At age five, a gap begins to appear between a child growing up in poverty and a child from a more affluent background in terms of numeracy and literacy.

Studies from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation show the learning gap can be as much as ten months. This attainment gap increases the older children get.

The impact of persistent poverty on a child is huge. Children living in poverty are twice as likely to live in bad housing which has an impact on their mental and physical health.

Fuel poverty is a major contributor to poor conditions, as many families have to make the basic choice between eating and heating their home.

The communities of deprivation are more likely to be of poor quality housing which has an impact on mental health but also on general morale. Facilities like playgrounds are more likely to be run down and vandalised.

Children from low income families are more likely to weigh less at birth, suffer from chronic illness during childhood or have a disability. This can be linked to poor quality housing and poor diet. Even as children, this group has a shorter life expectancy than children from higher income households would.

Poor children often have to forgo events that more of us would take for granted, like school trips, holidays or even having friends over for dinner.

As parent(s) are likely to be working in low wage jobs often with anti-social hours, and it is unlikely they will be able to spend as much time with their child and participating in worthwhile activities like reading.

Reading from a young age is directly linked to attainment in schools. These experiences enrich a child's life and increase their cultural capital which in turn will improve their life chances.

Cycle of deprivation

With all of these different factors influencing a child's life, it is no wonder they fall behind their more affluent peers.

They are less prepared and less able to learn. At age five, the pattern has set in and it becomes almost predictable that the cycle of deprivation will continue. Whole generations of children are practically written off and condemned like their Victorian counterparts to a life of drudgery. This is an outrage in the 21st century.

The SNP government has made 'closing the attainment gap' its priority. The Education Minister, John Swinney has been tasked with raising standards in

classrooms and recently, an additional £100million has been pledged to schools in conjunction with more power being given to head teachers to decide where it should be spent.

On paper this sounds like a good thing but the £100million allocated to schools is dwarfed by the £300million that has been cut from councils across the board. As a teacher, I welcome the extra resources for schools but I am doubtful it will make a huge amount of difference.

Poverty has to be tackled at the root for a real difference to be made. People need to earn higher wages and have secure contracts of employment.

Affordable, good quality social housing should be built and allocated to the people who need it. Free child care would make a massive difference to families, especially lone parent households.

Perhaps some of the £100million for schools could be put towards providing free school meals for all children instead of stigmatising the very poorest.

Until some of these ideas are implemented, child poverty will continue to exist. More generations will leave school with little or no exam results and the cycle will continue. It is time to tackle poverty at its heart and make a real difference to the lives of thousands of children.

Neoliberal crisis and the socialist indy case

by Colin Fox, SSP co-spokesperson

THE SCOTTISH Government published its annual Expenditure and Revenue figures [GERS] recently showing a marked decline in North Sea oil revenues and a £14.8billion deficit. SNP leader Nicola Sturgeon tried to deflect attention by claiming Scotland's 'onshore economy was strong' and returned to her favourite theme of preventing Scotland's exit from the EU.

Labour meanwhile seized on the figures. Ian Murray claimed Scotland had 'dodged a bullet' by rejecting independence as the UK economy was in rude health and capable of protecting us from dramatic falls in our living standards.

The fact is they are both wrong. For neither the Scottish economy nor the UK's are in good shape.

The respected economist [and independence supporter] Margaret Cuthbert of Stirling University slammed the GERS figures writing 'It is far from good enough for the First Minister to say '...the fundamentals of our economy are strong'.

It is becoming a trademark of the SNP Government that important statements are not backed up by relevant data.'

She asked why the SNP is spending so little on 'social protection' when the inequalities are so immense?

Damning indictment

It is a timely question, for this week, the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation was published, showing the same urban working class areas that have topped the table for the past three decades are still there. The statistics are a damning indictment of UK and Scottish Governments past and present, Tory, Labour and SNP.

What happened many will ask to the SNP's promise to eradicate fuel poverty in this energy rich nation by 2015? What happened to their promise to replace the unjust Council tax with a fairer alternative? What happened to their promise to build much needed social housing for the 170,000 families waiting on the list?

Patience will again be urged by SNP Ministers as more youngsters from Ferguslie Park are failed by school, as more young men from Barlanark end up in jail, as more teenage mothers in Muirhouse step onto the poverty treadmill and more elderly people in Drumchapel die before

their time after being denied the dignity they deserved in their final years.

Cuthbert is not the First Minister's only critic. The Bank of Scotland reports that half the firms in the oil and gas industry intend to make further redundancies on top of the 45,000 jobs already lost. Former RBS Chief Economist Sir Jeremy Peat agrees 'The Scottish economy is in a parlous state with Scottish GDP close to standstill.'

And Professor Brian Ashcroft's 'Scottish Economy Watch' concludes 'there is much to worry about concerning the future growth of the Scottish economy'. Real wages will continue to decline he concludes this year and next.

The Purchasing Managers Index concludes the labour market is continuing to weaken as job losses dampen demand further leading to lower wages, greater casualisation, a decline in investment, a fall in Scottish export volumes and further public sector austerity.

The omens for the UK economy are just as poor. The collapse in oil prices should have acted as a stimulus to growth but the fall in demand has been too much for this reduction to counteract.

The Purchasing Managers index for August concluded 'The UK economy is contracting at its fastest rate since 2008. The unprecedented month-on-month fall in all sectors of the economy has increased the chances of the UK sliding into recession. Confidence about the year ahead is at its lowest level since February 2009'.

'The Bank of England is not very confident about the future of the UK economy' concluded BBC Economics Editor Kamal Ahmed understating the announcement by Governor Mark Carney that base rates had been cut to 0.25 per cent in yet another attempt to stimulate demand.

Commenting on this evidence Martin Jacques [*Observer* 22/8/16] points out that Western economies have stagnated for a decade now. He argues that the era of neoliberalism may be over. There are signs, he concludes, that popular movements are emerging across the Western world to challenge its erstwhile 'hegemony'.

The revolts whilst politically incoherent are nonetheless encapsulated in the movements around Trump, Sanders, Corbyn, Le Pen, Brexit and the SNP says Jacques.

If he is right, and he could well be, it is

ironic because the same SNP has bought into neoliberalism in a big way. So their support reflects, at one and the same time, the backlash against Labour and neoliberalism, and an unknowing endorsement of it.

Like the other movements Jacques identifies the SNP have absorbed 'an inchoate expression of resentment and protest'. But as David Marquand asks in *The New Statesman* 'what use is a social democratic party if it doesn't represent the less fortunate?'

And there's the rub. For the SNP cannot serve and overthrow neoliberalism at the same time. So which is it to be?

The YES side lost the argument over currency last time because the SNP did not persuade voters Sterling was controllable. Now the architect of that 'let's keep the pound' strategy Joseph Stiglitz has conceded it was a mistake. He now favours the Scottish Socialist Party's option of having our own currency.

SNP's currency struggle

But in a sign the SNP is still struggling with the issue George Kerevan MP argues for a separate currency pegged to Sterling before admitting it would mean five years of austerity to build up the necessary reserves.

Whilst the SNP is wedded to neoliberalism, the Scottish Socialist Party wants an economy built around good wages, quality public services, taxes on the wealthy, public investment and ownership, labour market protection and much narrower income distribution.

Unlike the SNP we also favour nationalisation of Scotland's North Sea oil industry. That way the profits come to the Treasury not the world's richest companies. There is huge wealth to be generated in the North Sea for decades to come both in oil exploration and in decommissioning the existing infrastructure.

With the industry in such a poor state and the cost of borrowing so low now is the ideal time to take the sector back into public hands and reap rich rewards for future generations.

Mobilising Scotland's working class majority behind that kind of vision is the way to win Independence.

• This article was recently published the *Morning Star*

Lakeland lather over National Trust plans

by Roz Paterson

IT'S ALL goin' on down in Borrowdale this week, following the National Trust's barnstorming bid—£950,000, since you ask—for the lands pertaining to Thorneythwaite Farm in the Lake District, a farm worked by generations of sheep farmers, and probably familiar to Wordsworth, certainly to Melvyn Bragg, that other Lakeland son, who equated the NT with a Trump-esque 'billionaire bully'.

Why? Because they didn't buy the actual farmhouse, signalling that the end is probably nigh for all those centuries of tradition; because they outbid all the farmers who wanted this sublime patch of Olde England; and because they're going in for that new-fangled 're-wilding' business beloved of urban hipsters who wouldn't know a Swaledale Tup if it rammed them up the arse, instead of letting country folk do what they've always done, come hail or high water.

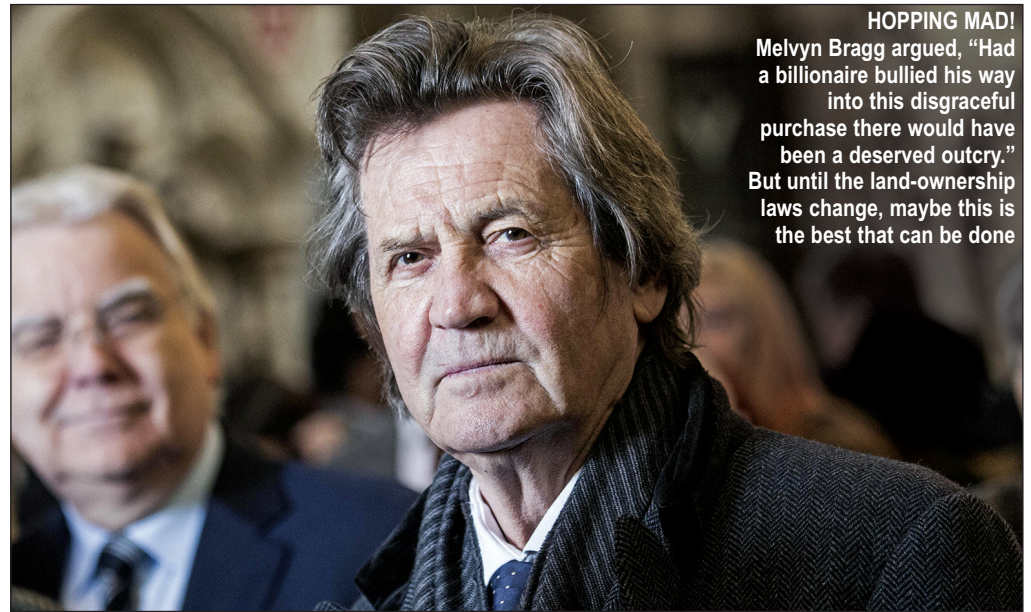
High water is actually one of the points to this, as anyone familiar with the downside of sheep-farming may already have guessed.

Ecological disaster

Sheep-farming is described by George Monbiot, in his book *Feral*, as "a slow-burning ecological disaster, which has done more damage to the living systems of this country than either climate change or industrial pollution."

Sheep graze like no other domestic animal; they eat the landscape down to the bone, to the point where it cannot recover by itself. Hence a Lakeland landscape of sweeping, barren hillsides and panoramic views.

It is this very starkness of which the poets wrote, but it isn't how it was before man took over, and it is argued, strongly, that it is no longer a landscape that serves. In these days of climate change,



HOPPING MAD!
Melvyn Bragg argued, "Had a billionaire bullied his way into this disgraceful purchase there would have been a deserved outcry." But until the land-ownership laws change, maybe this is the best that can be done

with drought and deluge taking up where our temperate climate seems to have left off, we need trees and vegetation, we need twisting rivers full of branches and fallen trees, to suck up the sudden, tempestuous rain before it floods the valleys, or slow it down as it courses into towns and villages.

That's what re-wilding means in this context—returning to a natural state, to combat the worst excesses of our now volatile climate.

We are vocal in lambasting Brazilian farmers for felling the rainforest to plant soya beans and farm cattle, so why would we approve the continued denuding of our own land?

In Scotland, re-wilding is afoot, with little patches of Caledonian forest taking root in substantial corners here and there, to pretty universal approval. Far from lamenting the greening-over of Queen Victoria's brigadoon, many of us are excited to see what a natural Scotland would look like.

Even the escapee Beavers on the Tay are being cheered on by the peeps, with the notable exception of landowners who make their money keeping our wildernesses heathery and barren, in order to breed game birds and, of

course, make them easy to shoot. In some corners, notably those occupied by the NFU, the Borrowdale stand-off is being characterised as the traditional town versus countryside one; a battle that has been raging since Johnny Town Mouse spat out a thistle-seed and took the hamper home to town.

But should 'townies' really be shoved out the debate about the fate of our (rapidly diminishing) countryside? Couldn't it be said that it is the very practises of the countryside—the intensive farming, the monocultures, the disastrous but traditional pattern of land-ownership—that have played a huge part in bringing us to this pass?

We're all connected

The urban/rural divide is surely a false one. We are all connected, our actions impact on each other; a fact brought home to us by the harsh realities of global warming.

It is sad to see traditions that served generations pass, but pass they must.

Few would argue now that whale-hunting has any place in our economy and culture, yet once it did, and the countries that continue the practice in the name of tradition are vilified for it.

Furthermore, sheep-farming is deeply unprofitable. Farmers make a slim margin, and that's including the EU subsidies that can account for 60 per cent of a farm's income. Post-Brexit, it could get even less plausible.

But what of Melvyn Bragg's claim, that the NT is nothing but a monied thug, pushing out the little guy? Yeah? Actually, the NT is no more a person than a multi-national corporation is.

It is a massive, well-supported charity that has, in its time, saved important buildings from ruin, and beautiful and important landscapes from development.

It is unfortunate that, as land-ownership laws stand today, the only way to save places for the people is to stump up the cash to actually buy them. But until these laws change, maybe this is the best that can be done.

William Wordsworth may not have approved of a forested Lake District, but then he probably wouldn't have been greatly inspired by the tailbacks of holiday traffic that clog Grasmere's narrow, windy roads every high day and holiday.

He did urge that we "Come forth into the light of things, Let Nature be your teacher."

And that, perhaps, is all we can do now.

Celtic fans' £188,800 Palestine solidarity

by Liam McLaughlin

VOICE READERS will be probably be aware that in the most recent home match in the Uefa Champions League, Celtic fans were beamed across TV screens and social media channels around the world in a show of peaceful and dignified solidarity with the oppressed people of occupied Palestine as the team took on the Israeli champions, Hapoel Be'er Sheva.

The purpose of this article however is not to merely lay out the events of that night but to add some context and attempt to show-case the deeper significance of the actions of the fans, from the perspective of someone who is both a passionate supporter of the Palestinian cause and of Glasgow Celtic.

The first things to set out immediately is to address the argument surrounding relationship of politics with sport and in particular its relationship with football.

Given the history of Celtic is that of a club formed to support the oppressed and poor of the Irish diaspora who settled in the East End of Glasgow in the aftermath of the Irish potato famine, to not have highlighted the increasingly volatile and harrowing reality of the Israeli occupation and settlement of Palestine while the Israeli champions took to the field of Celtic Park would have in itself have been a political statement. As is the very decision of Uefa to allow Israeli football teams to even have any involvement in its competitions.

Celtic pride

This is of course done while Palestinian kids playing football on the beaches of Gaza are being murdered and Palestinian professional footballers are held in Israeli jails without trial or charge.

The reaction to the protest, with images from the occupied Gaza Strip and the West Bank showing Celtic and Scottish emblems being projected onto buildings and banners fills me with immense pride.

Pride that the actions of a group of fans in a corner of Glasgow's East End have reached a people under siege and reminded them that their cause is one with international support and perhaps given them much needed strength and solidarity. Pride that a group of largely working class people,



FREE PALESTINE: soon after Celtic fans' defiant protest last month, images flooded back from Gaza and the West Bank showing Celtic banners and emblems being projected onto buildings

united in their political beliefs and their love of their club stuck two fingers up to the corrupt individuals who unfortunately rule the roost at the head of European football and refused to be bowed by their intimidation and threats to try silence or discourage their democratic right to peaceful protest and of political expression.

What fills me with the most pride however is the still ongoing #MatchtheFinefor-Palestine crowd funder. Originally set at the ambitious target of £15,000, the cash raised is now nearing its £188,800 final target (Celtic formed in 1888). Every penny of this crowdsourced fundraising will be subsequently split between Medical Aid for Palestinians and a health and social centre in occupied Palestine providing support and sporting facilities for the people there.

Word has reached us back in Glasgow that the intention is to start and fund a football team within the centre which will include the name Celtic.

Perhaps the most prevalent point in regards to the demonstration is the sheer volume of media attention the demonstration received both within Scotland and in the rest of the world, and the comparative tone of the coverage received. Football in Scotland remains one of the main pillars of working class life largely untouched following the

brutal assault on our workplaces and communities in the name of neoliberalism, deregulation and subsequent austerity.

Football has the power to bring tens of thousands of people together and be a force for good, political education and solidarity within people who would otherwise consider politics to be something distant and for the elites of society.

A small price to pay

We are however continually mocked, demonised and attacked in the press and by politicians here in Scotland as we remain the only section of society uniquely subject to legislation limiting our right to political expression within the confines of our chosen Saturday afternoon entertainment.

The fans' actions that evening will result a fine for our club, however in the grand scheme of things I'm sure it's one *Voice* readers will agree is a small price to pay for shining the light on the illegal Israeli occupation of Palestine.

For those in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, sport and every aspect of their life are affected by political decisions made by the Israeli government. If our actions have helped raise awareness of that reality and given those people some hope and strength, no fine in the world could deter us.