

ICS BOOKS

# THE BEST OF 25 YEARS OF **THE SCOTTISH REVIEW** **ISSUE 11**

EDUCATION  
LANGUAGE  
EU REFERENDUM

Hello

Bonjour



# The Best of 25 Years of the Scottish Review

Issue 11

Education  
Language  
EU Referendum

Edited by  
Islay McLeod

ICS Books

To

*Kenneth Roy, founder of the Scottish Review, mentor and friend,  
and to all the other contributors who are no longer with us.*

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EDUCATION

# The bear pit

Anonymous

1998

I could've been anything I wanted to be. And I chose to be a teacher! And I chose to teach English despite having Highers in science and maths. Inspired by my own English teacher, I burned to spread the word. I wanted to encourage kids 'to get inside a man's skin and walk around in it for a while' before they judged people. I wanted to promote soul-searching so that like Piggy they could realise that 'there isn't no fear unless we get frightened of people'.

I always believed teaching was about more than grading kids in the under-14 age bracket from A to F and banding them Foundation, General or Credit thereafter. I expected it to be about a lot more than filling in masses of report cards, referral slips, discipline logs and pupil profiles. As well as helping them to achieve written and oral proficiency in their mother tongue, I wanted to share my love and knowledge of English language and literature with growing minds. I hoped to broaden their experience, if only second hand, to develop their critical skills, to awaken their humanitarian instincts and, above all, to promote tolerance and peace.

I hoped, too, to stimulate and encourage creativity in all its forms.

Fool! Fool! I hear you cry. But young fools are the best of fools and I succeeded in putting my ideas into very rewarding practice in the classroom for several years. Fairly average pupils learned not only to pass exams, but to read novels, love poetry and understand the message. And their pieces of personal and imaginative writing were next to none.

But that was in the heady days of flower power, Harold Wilson and a genuine chance of a decent education for all. Born into a large family, I had managed to get through university because of my full grant. I encouraged my pupils to feel that they, too, could 'be anything they wanted to be' – and they were prepared to co-operate with the teacher to achieve their goals.

In 1990, I came back to the classroom after an absence of a decade. I was devastated at the changes which had occurred. Pupil power had become the order of the day. The first time a pupil demanded her work be marked for the next day because 'that's what you get paid for' and they were 'keeping you in a job', I was speechless. Now I just shrug my shoulders. That's life. Teachers have become facilitators and pupils expect them to dance to any tune they call. The common calls are 'I'm no daen this', 'This is borin', and 'Why can't we have a video?'

No doubt lengthening dole queues and other socioeconomic factors have contributed to this change. But the main factor is the new parent power which has quickly translated



itself into pupil power, as streetwise kids realised that they could use their parents to beat the teacher. This was brought home to me very clearly by members of my own family. My sister phoned recently to ask me how to spell 'illegible'. On asking why she needed this spelling so urgently in the middle of *Whose Line Is It Anyway?*, she explained that her 12-year-old daughter had been given lines for using the F-word in class. Her mother, my sister, was writing a note to say that her daughter would not be doing these lines since the teacher's instructions were illegible. I almost choked with rage. I thought of the instructions I have to scribble daily on punishment exercises for abominably behaved pupils before they escape from my classroom at the end of a period, dodging amongst the mob who are pressing to get in. It is common nowadays in some schools for parents to say their child is not doing lines because the teacher 'picked' on them or because other pupils were misbehaving as well. It is, unfortunately, also common for the management, ever mindful of falling rolls and falling roll-related salaries, to side with the parent.

Sadly, today, for many teachers, walking into the classroom is a bit like walking into a bear pit. The teacher is baited, badgered and sometimes bullied by packing pupils who know their power. Too often there is little or no support to be had from any quarter. Sometimes it becomes a question of survival. I have learned not to take insults personally. In fact, I thought it quite a feather in my cap when I was called 'a right bitch'. In some way, it indicated that I was 'she who must be obeyed'.

In most classes now, discipline has to take precedence over any attempt at enlightenment or stimulation. Mundane written tasks which can be enforced, assessed and recorded are the order of the day. Creativity has become as rare in the English classroom as an A pass in CSYS. Management do not have a problem with this.

Few schools, with sights set firmly on climbing up the league table, are interested in creativity. While working in a school quite near the top of the league table, I was told that 'there is no room for creative teaching'. Another 'good' school told English staff that there was no place for 'mere enrichment' – a wonderful oxymoron if I ever heard one.

So what happens to the creative kids, or the average kids who would benefit from stimulation? They get bored. They under-achieve. They lose out in an education system which is in crisis. There is a huge divide between educational theory and practice in Scotland today. I have no quarrel with the theory of equal opportunity for all. I am more than prepared to accept that people with learning difficulties and behavioural problems should be taught in mainstream classes. My quarrel is with the lack of support given to such people and to the teachers who have to cope with them in a crowded classroom.

In an average General/Foundation class in English, for example, there will usually be two or three dyslexic pupils, at least one of whom will be unable to read or write without a great deal of assistance. The assistance is rarely available every period and will only be one-to-one for short spells. For the rest of the time this pupil will demand a lot of teacher time – but not half as much as pupils with behaviour problems who are appearing in increasing numbers.

Attention Deficiency/Hyperactivity Syndrome is manifesting itself more and more frequently in the classroom. Pupils with this problem need a lot of support. But teachers with such pupils in their class need support too, especially when you realise that their pupil contact number can be over 100 per day. I have been insulted, sworn at and even pushed about by such pupils – in more than one school – but complaints to superiors have often fallen on deaf ears. Sometimes I have even been made to feel at fault. I am told the pupil 'has problems' and must not be confronted. But sometimes they demand to be confronted. Producing wild animal calls, singing at the top of their voice, and beating up the person sitting next to them are only a few of the many disruptive techniques they have mastered.

Yet it is fashionable to blame the teacher. For a start, it means you don't have to tackle the real problem – what to do with disruptive pupils. It is also an effective way of deflecting the flack from your own head. So everybody joins in eagerly. If the Prime Minister blames the teachers, it is little wonder that the parents do. And it makes their lives much more guilt-free, enabling them to pass the buck. Recently, after a particularly harrowing pre-lunch period with a bunch of FUBARS (ask anyone in Stirling to translate), I joined the dinner queue with them, although it would have been wiser to lock them in a cage and throw them raw meat. The boy in front was being overfamiliar with the dinner lady and she was letting him away with it. I asked her if she knew him. 'He's ma son,' she replied. 'His behaviour has been absolutely atrocious in my class this morning,' I said, feeling pleased that I'd shopped the monster. 'Ah ken. He's like that at hame as well,' she replied and continued serving him as if she had no responsibility whatsoever for his behaviour.

If I were to remove this disruptive pupil from my classroom or be the cause of his suspension from school, what burning coals of criticism would be heaped upon my head. I know nobody learns anything outside the classroom door. I know many disruptive pupils consider suspension a holiday and come back triumphant. I also know that his mother would be choked off at having to put up with him for several more hours each day. And that's what really hits home.

Teachers have become the nation's teensitters. The evidence is to be found in every school in the land. Once the sixth year in high school was the happy transitional year for those who had decided to go on to further education. Now these pupils are vastly outnumbered by time-wasters who have nowhere else to go and nothing better to do. I have even known a few who came back for a seventh year. At least if they are at school, parents can get child benefit for them and they are kept out of trouble and out of the fridge. Telephone and heating bills are also reduced. Nobody seems to mind that the school may have nothing further to offer these pupils, least of all school management. As long as 'the gateways to Higher are guarded', i.e. as long as they are not presented for exams which they might fail thereby reducing the school's rating in the league tables, they can idle as much as they like. After all, the teachers are paid to put up with them.

I have only recently experienced hell in the shape of a sixth year whose members slipped through unguarded gateways. In a class of 28, only half a dozen had any chance of passing Higher English. Some had achieved only grades four or five in Standard Grade. In the prelim exam, 15 had scored less than 35%. Were they downhearted? Not in the least! They had come back to school for the sport, the company of friends and the need to hang on to childhood a little longer. But I was downhearted since they were wasting my time as well as their own. I had to give up my lunchtimes to write reviews of personal reading out of that bunch. I had to desiccate (and desecrate) the works of Philip Larkin to feed them crumbs of literature. They wouldn't swallow anything bigger.

I even tried explaining common usage such as clichés and proverbs to them.

'For instance,' I said, 'one swallow... '.

Met with blank stares, I gave them a clue. 'One swallow doesn't... make... '.

'You drunk?' came the reply after some thought. It could have been fun, but the laugh was lost by the time I had explained the unintended humour to them.

Yet teachers are blamed for falling standards, juvenile delinquency, poor pupil attendance, bad manners – everything. President Clinton even blames teachers for bad parents because he realised, in a moment of rare perception, that irresponsible parents were once pupils too. And decent parents, peacemakers, philanthropists, Presidents? Were they not pupils once? Teachers never get the credit for producing such people. Rather, they have become a handy scapegoat for poor management, under-funding, social deprivation and political hypocrisy.

Because the General Teaching Council, unlike other professional bodies such as the British Medical Association, does not seem to see the support and protection of its members as any of its business, teachers are defenceless against the savagery of pupils, parents, politicians and the press.

I could've been anything I wanted to be and I chose to be a teacher. Now I feel overworked, undervalued and disillusioned. I am too old to retrain and too poor to retire, and so I carry on because I have a family to feed. I am efficient in the classroom. I can keep discipline and get the results required, but only very rarely do I have the chance to teach the way I want to, the way that young people really need.

# Learning in freedom

John Aitkenhead

1998

A month before Easter, the editor of *The Scotsman* gave a full page to one aspect of schools which is receiving some attention just now. This is the question of truancy. It was not a special article let alone a second or third leader, but quiet, rational coverage with an excellent range of reference. Here were the results of a committee of senior pupils.

'Scorn' was quoted from the spokesperson for the EIS. This august body was concluding that of course teenage boys truanting would try to find good reasons for taking the road to freedom. But surely it was naive of the EIS not to realise that pupils and teachers would be aware of all that? To my way of thinking, much more significant was the conclusion of a number of senior girls after research: 'Different reasons were given for playing truant but right across the age range, right across the board, was one single feeling common to all, namely the deep loathing of school'.

The 1872 Act of compulsory education was no great liberal declaration of a belief in founding any warm culture for all classes. It takes no more than a reading of the Hansard speeches in the House of Commons on the topic to realise that a strong feeling of competition with other European countries was the driving force. The future soldiers and sailors of Germany, France and Italy were having a better elementary schooling than Britain was providing for the youngsters destined for our armed forces. More than that, the parents who might enjoy the earnings of their school-age children would now lose these earnings. The first borough of London to put the new legislation into practice had parties of parents pulling down by night the work of builders by day.

I'm not sure of the time of it, but know it was chanted:

*Teacher, teacher, let me in  
Ma feet's cauld, my shins din  
If ye dinna let me in  
Ah'll plunk the schule in the afternin'*

In 1936, A S Neill published (tongue in cheek for the title) *Is Scotland Educated?* It is worth reading today after more than 60 years. It is not generally known for how long Neill was a thorn in the flesh of the establishment and on what basic grounds.

More than 20 years earlier, he had published *A Dominie's Log* in defiance of the local education committee which employed him as headmaster at Gretna. As headmaster, he had to keep a 'log' recording all that was happening in his school. But there was a condition: he must not criticise the system that was employing him. Neill continued to be

openly critical of the system and of the government of the day which had been promoting what was called the 'Great War'. He openly shared his opinions with the pupils, especially the adolescents about to leave school. He told them it was not their war, but that the government was using them. He explained that boys of their age in Germany were not their enemies. It was the governments of both countries whose plans for empire control had them conscripting the young men.

Neill knew quite well that the parents of his pupils probably agreed with him but were afraid of the local farmers and other employers. Anyway, he was sacked and promptly published *A Dominie Dismissed*. His views were basically pacifist, but he said he didn't have the courage to become a CO (conscientious objector). So he 'joined up' and soon found himself in the army of occupation in Germany. How accurate his forecast about the results of this war had been was admitted when at the end of hostilities the infamous trench warfare in France was referred to officially as 'the most highly organised slaughter of young males in the history of Europe'.

At the end of the war, Neill started a small international school at Hellerau in Germany with pupils and staff from Germany, France and Britain. This lasted for four years until he decided to come to England to continue the international school, first at Lyme Regis in a house called Summerhill which became the Summerhill we know at Leiston three years later.

Among Neill's mail in 1937 was a letter from a young Scottish teacher asking if Neill would agree to a visit from him when the Scottish school holidays started in the summer. Neill readily agreed, quite unaware of what this would lead to. The young teacher was so inspired by what he saw happening at Summerhill that he suggested to Neill the possibility of starting a school like his back in Scotland.

'Na, na, laddie,' replied Neill, 'Scotland is too benighted to host a real free school'. The young teacher had to be content with that at the time. Totally convinced that he had experienced a radical alternative approach to education, he asked Neill if he could repeat the visit the following year and again Neill agreed.

Whereas in 1937 the first thing the teacher had seen was a boy building a dinghy under the eye of a good carpenter (something that might be seen today in any one of 100 schools in Britain, but not in 1937), the first thing he saw in 1938 was the kids digging their own air raid shelters in the tough Suffolk clay.

This year, Neill's advice to the teacher if he still thought about a Scottish Summerhill was that he should get cracking as soon as possible before freedom went west altogether. In little more than a year, war had broken out.

I dare say my being invited to contribute to this sequence of essays had something to do with the school I started at the beginning of that war, and which I ran for 57 years, called Kilquhanity House School, after the site. KilKennedy was the original spelling of Kilquhanity, meaning the church or burial place of the Kennedys. Sometimes when I have told young pupils of this, I have seen them go off together wondering where to start

digging. Some day serious students might follow suit, for our seven and a half acres include the obvious remains of a prehistoric site of habitation, the meadow between us and the River Urr being the floor of a lake as the ice from the last Ice Age melted. Some years, when it has been flooded again, we can easily imagine living on its shore.

Many a time since we started in 1940, I have said I was guided here in the search for a place to start the school like Summerhill, the chance for wide learning being so obvious. Woods and streams, the river so near, the hills in the other direction so attractive and the whole of Galloway at our door step.

Over the 18th century, the buildings for a home farm had been added and so we soon had cows, pigs and poultry, though never in big numbers. Children loved that. I taught many the art of hand-milking which I had learned in 1923. We made butter and cheese, the latter I had to learn.

What I feel is needed today in schools in general in Scotland is more real communication between pupils and teachers. After visiting Summerhill in 1938, I wrote: 'Here were about 80 boys and girls of all ages and several colours living together and learning in freedom, helping to make the rules of their small community. It was a new world in the context of schools and to me it was intoxicating'. There is a kind of family feeling shared by people who have come up through a school together, and of course this will be stronger in a boarding school. I don't think Kilquhanity is unique in this respect, but there is no doubt that something quite special was engendered and enjoyed here in the early years and seems to have continued in spite of inevitable changes. On the face of it, this something should be explored.

What has been a central feature in the life of Kilquhanity has been the weekly council meeting where everyone was present and all the day-to-day concerns could be raised and debated. An older boy or girl was in the chair and another was the scribe and even the youngest kids' complaints were given equal attention. The result was a real training for democracy, where the children could question and disagree if necessary with the adults' opinions. What a transformation this could make in schools! The meeting also helped to deal with any bullying in the school – a problem today which is exercising many minds.

Some people have said that what happened at Kilquhanity was only possible because of the small numbers and our independence, but two headmasters managed to incorporate some of the ideas in state schools. R F Mackenzie, sadly no longer with us, was one of the many teachers who came back from the Second World War determined that things on the school front would never be the same as before. He wrote and published *A Question of Living*, addressing honestly the problem of growing up in post-war Europe.

The other headmaster, also a Mackenzie but not related, by a strange accident came across the work of A S Neill in Maryland, America, while doing a part-time exchange. He was determined that if ever he was in charge of a school he would introduce Neill's ideas. Finally he did so in Pilton, a run-down suburb of Edinburgh. For details of the transformation into a unique school, do read *Craigroyston Days*.

I now come to a statement that might sum up all I have touched on. It might seem political rather than educational, but in my opinion there was a crisis in society which prompted my starting the school and there is after 57 years another crisis in society.

Ask yourself, ask any friend willing to consider the matter, ask any debating group the question: what is the greatest threat to our society as we approach the millennium? Almost certainly the answer will come fast: the start of another world war.

Another question: what would be our surest guarantee against such a war with its increasing likelihood of being nuclear? The answer is again obvious: more practice of real democratic government – the assurance that by the people as well as of the people and for the people is kept in mind. In other words, when decisions are made that affect the lives of people, then these people should be included in making the decisions.

The weekly council meeting at Kilquhanity and Summerhill is the perfect example.

# The fat lady sang

Magnus Linklater

1999

'Have you got a penis?' my four-year-old son asked his grandfather casually, as we sat at tea in the Station Hotel in Inverness. The general conversation came to an abrupt halt, and several ladies in hats choked on their fancy cakes. The grandfather moved swiftly to avert disaster.

'So you want to know where Aberdeen is?' he asked, feigning deafness. 'A very good question if I may say so.' Swiftly pre-empting any repetition, he diverted his grandson's attention with the offer of a sticky bun, and a graphic description of the city that had played such a large part in his life. Both seemed aware, however, that the principal question remained unanswered.

That was unusual. My father, Eric Linklater – the grandfather in question – rarely avoided an issue. He had a mind that reacted swiftly, relished wit, drew on seemingly bottomless wells of general knowledge, and used words as the best possible weapons in life. Everything that he wrote and said rested on the twin foundations of the English language and the elegance of its expression. For a man whose father had been a sea captain, and who was, by his own admission, descended from a long line of Orkney peasants, this familiarity with what he described as 'the sacred importance of well-appointed words' was remarkable. It must have been an acquired rather than an inherited characteristic, and, if that is so, the place he acquired it was Aberdeen.

At Aberdeen Grammar School, before the First World War, the curriculum routinely included Greek and Latin, Milton, John Stuart Mill, Ben Jonson and Francis Bacon – with Aberdeen's most famous former pupil, Lord Byron, thrown in for light relief. Latin was taught by translating passages from Burke, Clarendon or Macaulay. English was seen as a modern substitute for the classics. 'It had to be useful, it had to be precise, it had to preserve the decorum of an imperial tongue,' he wrote later. Those days were the rock on which his career as a writer of novels, and a crafter of histories, was built.

Not surprisingly, perhaps, he regarded his election as Rector of Aberdeen University in 1945 as one of the greatest honours to have been given him. His rivals for the post were formidable: Admiral Sir Robert Burnett, a war hero, Tom Johnston, Secretary of State for Scotland, and Sir John Anderson, former Governor of Bengal. Nevertheless, my father won, mainly because he was seen as the anti-establishment candidate. 'I was put forward as a symbol of revolt,' he wrote. 'At the mature age of 46, I was the protagonist of youth, and its impatience with the old regime. And sadly, I betrayed my supporters. I behaved with the utmost decorum, and my rectorial address was a model of what should be said from the platform to which I had been elevated.'



Actually, it was a little more than that. He called his speech *The Art of Adventure*, and it was a tour de force. It ranged from the story of Noah to Robinson Crusoe, and 'Guy' Gibson of Dambuster fame. It posed to its student audience the choice between life as an adventure or life as a burden, and warmly recommended the former. It warned against a growing reliance on the state, and in a heady passage praised the rights of the individual over the tyranny of the consensus view. It is still remembered in Aberdeen as a great rectorial address. Years later, as he contemplated his will, my father sealed his long relationship with Aberdeen by donating his wonderful collection of Scottish Colourist paintings to the university, where they are housed in the specially named Linklater Rooms.

Fifty-three years after his rectorial address, I found myself standing as Rector. The post had been left vacant by the sad death of Allan Macartney, MEP and Scottish Nationalist, and the approach to me had come from members of the Aberdeen University Debater, with whom I had joined in a lively discussion about crime and punishment. How could I refuse? My entry was very much a last-minute affair. There were fewer than three weeks to go before the election, and it seemed an alarmingly short time in which to inform the electorate of who I was, persuade them that I was worth voting for, and remind them what on earth a Rector did in the first place. No time for focus groups or Blair-style market research. And all of this, while I was two and a half hours away in Edinburgh. But to turn down the offer seemed unthinkable.

My opponents were a mixed bunch. They included no Secretary of State or war hero, but there was a TV star – more formidable, as it turned out, than either of these. Ms Clarissa Dickson Wright is one of the *Two Fat Ladies* of television fame – a cook, raconteur, reformed alcoholic and heavyweight performer in public, whose ample proportions bear witness to the dedication she brings to her profession. Also standing was a Major Richard Eccles, an ex-Army ski instructor, and Dr Norman Allan, a former SNP councillor and mature student at the university. Neither, I thought, could be underestimated. But the front runner was definitely the Fat Lady.

It turned out that she had already stolen a march by touring the university, baking the students a chocolate cake, and promising them that she would campaign to improve the university food. This was vote-winning stuff, but worse was to follow. Scarcely had I agreed to stand than I found myself in the middle of an old-style 'dirty tricks' campaign. It was suggested that I had only entered the race with the aim of using the position of Rector to lay my hands on my father's pictures. Someone had dug up some correspondence between me and the university from years earlier when the pictures had first gone to Aberdeen, and I had enquired whether it might be possible to borrow two of them back. The answer had been a polite No, and that, I thought, was the end of it.

Now, however, Ms Dickson Wright was said to be campaigning to 'keep the Linklater pictures in Aberdeen'. I was portrayed as the grasping interloper. The story made the nationals; it was in *The Observer* and the *Daily Mail*. In the jargon of the newspaper business, 'it had legs'. It was time for me to swing into action.

The Rector's post is a curiously Scottish institution. On the one hand, it is there to represent the interests and needs of the students. On the other hand, the Rector presides at meetings of the University Court, the governing body of the university, which includes both the Principal and the Chancellor. He has to be impartial on the Court, but fiercely partisan in representing the students. To say there is a potential conflict of interest is to put it mildly. I decided to deal with that problem later. There were more pressing issues at hand.

I met my small but dedicated team at the student union offices in Old College, and we sat down to talk tactics. We agreed that my cooking ability would not allow me to compete at the kitchen range, and that Ms Dickson Wright's TV profile was probably higher than mine, not to say wider. Instead of competing directly, we would raise the stakes by questioning her ability to represent the students, while playing up my allegedly superior knowledge of things Scottish. This was to be about issues, not personalities, a slogan that sounded dimly familiar.

The dirty tricks campaign, we reckoned, might well boomerang. Did the students really want someone who resorted to this kind of underhand attack? Meanwhile, I suggested borrowing a current advertising slogan, in which a young lady wearing nothing but a bra, looks saucily into the camera and says: 'Can't cook. Who cares?' I stressed my non-culinary skills. A series of leaflets was strewn across the campus, proclaiming 'He's not fat', and describing me as Independent, Intelligent, Influential. 'Vote WonderMagnus for Rector', they urged. Student fees, we agreed, were a thoroughly bad thing and should be abolished. (I made a mental note to check any recent columns I had written to see if I disagreed with myself – mercifully, I hadn't.) University accommodation was lamentable, and should be improved. There should be better lighting in the lanes off the High Street and student bus fares should be reduced.

Secretly, I wondered whether this was enough to turn the tide. Where was the Big Idea, the 'vision thing'? My team assured me, however, that fees and accommodation were the kind of things students cared about, and we set off into the night to find some of them. Our first discovery was that very few knew there was an election. Even fewer seemed to care. I stood outside the refectory and began canvassing. This consisted of approaching unwary undergraduates, introducing myself as 'Magnuslinklaterstandingforrector' and thrusting a leaflet into their hand. Since we were not supposed to enter the building to canvass, and since there was a bitter November wind keening through the streets of the Granite City, not many stayed to question our tactics or our credentials. Hooded figures, shrouded in bomber jackets or parkas, forged past us, heads down, in the direction of warmth. A handful stopped to ask curious questions, largely about my credentials for the job. But most, sensing that any evidence of lingering might trap them into a longer exchange, accepted the leaflet and hurried on.

Ms Dickson Wright was nowhere to be seen. She was, apparently, signing her latest book in London. I sensed a campaigning issue – will the Fat Lady be too busy to fulfil her rectorial duties? On the other hand, would I? Best, perhaps, to stick to the leaflets.

It was now that I first met my other two rivals. Dr Allan turned out to be a charming elderly gentleman from Nairn, mild in manner and diffident in approach, who proffered himself as 'the local candidate' and who promised to be constantly available to the students largely because, as a retired person, he would have more time on his hands than the other candidates. This, to me, was undeniable – only leaving open the question of whether the students wanted a Rector who was around quite so much. The fourth contender was a very different kettle of fish. Major Eccles had seen military service in Europe and Northern Ireland. He was keen, earnest, and officious, his campaigning style tending towards the interventionist. He would buttonhole even the most reluctant of students, ask them whether they intended to vote, and tick them off if they showed any sign of wavering. A hand-pumping, shoulder-gripping kind of character, he had planned his campaign down to the last detail, and, it emerged, had spent a considerable amount of time making his presence felt around the campus. He was the living embodiment of the military slogan: 'Time spent on reconnaissance is seldom wasted'.

My team, suitably impressed, drew comfort nevertheless from the thought that the more he was exposed to the students the less enthusiastic they might be about voting for him. A little of the Major, they felt, went a long way.

The main election event was a question-and-answer session involving all the candidates front of a student audience. My team and I rehearsed the issues, marshalled facts and figures about student grants, ran over the likely questions. Then we walked over to the hall where our demanding audience awaited.

My first impression was that this was not exactly a mass turnout. My second was that most of them seemed to be drawn from the election teams of the various candidates. There were, however, reporters from the student newspaper, *The Gaudie*, so our words would, we imagined, have a wider exposure.

We were each required to make an opening statement. Dr Allan's was so self-effacing that I wondered whether he was secretly bidding for the sympathy vote. He admitted he was older than his rivals, had little of their experience, and might not be the ideal choice. But he would be there for students to talk to, and that, he felt, was an important consideration.

Ms Dickson Wright, by contrast, was straight from the shoulder. As a reformed alcoholic, she knew all about personal problems and how best to deal with them. As a television performer, she would use her high profile to expose student issues to the wider public. And, as a jolly good cook, she was well-placed to improve the standards of one of life's basic ingredients. She sat down to a round of applause.

My own speech was a good deal less lively. I spoke about the iniquity of tuition fees, and my invaluable experience of Scottish politics, while stressing my father's close relationship with the university. I used the opportunity to rebut the scurrilous accusation that I would use the rectorship to remove my father's pictures from the university and was gratified when the Fat Lady said she had never suggested anything of the kind. 'I

stand right behind you on that one,' she said. 'Just as long as you don't stand in front of me,' I murmured, and got a laugh.

The Major came last. He had thought long and hard about standing and had consulted his wife about it. Although he had not been to university, he thought it was a good way of discovering what sort of person you were. He believed his military experience and his outdoor activities qualified him to represent today's students, and he would ensure that he was constantly available. The conditions of the ladies' lavatories were as important as student grants. Did that mean him spending much time in the ladies' lavatories?, he was asked. If necessary, yes, came the brisk response.

He was the only speaker brave enough to speak up in favour of tuition fees: paying for things gave you a sense of their value, he argued. The audience groaned. I began to realise why honesty was not necessarily the politician's best friend. As the questions drew to an end, the audience was asked to signal the winner by applause. This was mainly a test of the supporting teams' lungs, but, for the record, mine roared the loudest.

Election Day was bitterly cold. Tramping from one polling station to another, we hugged ourselves to keep warm and clutched every passing voter to extract their support. Our loyal teams fanned out to assess the turnout, reporting back that it seemed relatively high, considering the weather and the widespread evidence of apathy. Finally, at six precisely, the polls closed, and we were invited into the Chancellor's offices to observe the count. The only absentee was Ms Dickson Wright who explained that her publishers had threatened to tear up her contract if she failed to appear for her latest book-signing. For the rest of us it was nerve-wracking stuff. Ballot boxes were up-ended, voting papers sorted into piles. The turnout had been 17.2%, one of the best in recent years.

We tried to work out which piles were growing fastest. It was surprisingly difficult to guess, though the Fat Lady seemed to be marginally ahead. The voting system was the single transferable vote, with the candidate having the lowest number eliminated and his second preferences distributed among the remainder. On the first count, Dr Allan came bottom, and conceded defeat with grace and charm. 'I'll support you,' he told me. 'Your mother was a nationalist.' His second votes were distributed, and another count took place. This time things looked a great deal closer. The Fat Lady was clearly out in front, but the Major and I seemed very close. Too close to call, as it turned out. After four recounts, we were declared exactly tied, on 560 votes each, while Ms Dickson Wright had 680.

A tie, we learnt, was unprecedented in the modern annals of the rectorship. How should it be resolved? I suggested a duel, the Major proposed cutting cards. In the end, we agreed to spin a coin. I called heads – and, as I usually do on these occasions, lost. My votes were redistributed, giving Ms Dickson Wright a commanding lead – she polled 941 votes to the Major's 718.

Speaking by telephone from a London bookstore, she thanked her supporters and pledged herself to be a hard-working and dedicated Rector.

As I headed back to the station, I found myself torn between disappointment and private relief. Would I have been able to do anything serious about tuition fees? Would I have held the University Court riveted by my arguments on students' sleeping quarters and street lighting? And would I have spent enough time in the ladies' loos? I decided, on balance, that Ms Dickson Wright was probably better equipped in all these departments than I was, and I wished her well. My only regret was that I would not now be following in my father's footsteps and standing where he once did to deliver the rectorial address. On the other hand, I could never have done it half as well.

# Who runs our schools?

Walter Humes

2003

My starting point is a statement by the historian Christopher Smout, who offers a challenging perspective on the effects of Scottish schooling:

*It is in the history of the school more than in any other aspect of recent social history that the key lies to some of the more depressing aspects of modern Scotland. If there are in this country too many people who fear what is new, believe the difficult to be impossible, draw back from responsibility, and afford established authority and tradition an exaggerated respect, we can reasonably look for an explanation in the institutions that moulded them.*

That was written in 1986 and, of course, a great deal has happened since. The political climate has changed with the end of a long period of Conservative Administration in 1997. There is the Scottish Parliament and all the hopes for the development of a new Scotland associated with it. The prevailing political discourse now emphasises such things as social inclusion, enterprise, citizenship and opportunity for all. And, not least, education is very high on the political agenda, both in Scotland and in the UK generally. It is seen as central to the knowledge economy, requiring substantial investment if we are to respond adequately to the pressures of globalisation in its various forms (economic, technological, political, cultural, environmental).

This changed context raises the question of whether Smout's comments have any continuing validity. When the operational principles for the Scottish Parliament were being drawn up a number of important values were asserted, including power sharing, accountability, accessibility, openness, responsiveness, participation. These terms, or variants of them, all appeared in the official document *Shaping Scotland's Parliament*, which was published by the Scottish Office in 1998. The underlying idea – which has been repeated in various forms since – was that the new Scotland would involve more people in decision-making, would encourage greater civic activism, and would make politicians more subject to public scrutiny. And it is certainly possible to point to some evidence in support of this reading of the situation:

- \* The first piece of legislation in the new parliament, the Standards in Scotland's Schools etc Act of 2000, was informed by a major consultation exercise and the results of the consultation were published.

- \* The role of parliamentary committees in calling ministers and civil servants to account (e.g. in relation to the examinations crisis of 2000) has been significant and would not have been possible under the pre-devolution system.
- \* The National Debate on Education initiated in 2002 had, as one of its aims, the involvement of a much wider constituency of people than those who traditionally respond to government-led initiatives.

But are these examples sufficient to discount the relevance of Smout's analysis to current circumstances? Are Scottish people more willing to take on responsibility than before? Is fear of the new any less in evidence? Are we more willing to question tradition and authority? And what contribution is education making in trying to shift the culture of defeatism and conformity? In addressing these questions, I want to tell three stories about Scottish education. The stories represent different perspectives expressed by different voices and I hope they cast light on the distribution and exercise of power, not only in Scottish education but also in Scottish society more generally.

Firstly, there are the official voices of politicians, inspectors, directors of education and leading figures in the policy community. These are people who enjoy 'narrative privilege' in explaining and justifying their actions: that is, they have opportunities to speak in arenas where they will be heard and reported. They know about communication and are well-connected to the press and other forms of media. Their characteristic voice is authoritative, confident, fluent, articulate, informed, emotionally controlled and, at least within their own terms, coherent. And although there are sometimes disagreements between individuals within the policy community, the collective public expression of official voices is remarkably consonant.

Secondly, there are the unofficial voices of classroom teachers, parents, employers, academics and researchers. Here the picture is rather more confused. What the unofficial voices share is a desire to be heard and taken seriously. But there is often a fair degree of dissonance between them. They have different priorities. Some focus on particular special interests, others have a more general desire to influence educational policy on a broad front. There is a lack of coordination and harmony between the voices. The vocal tones are varied – at different times assertive, demanding, hopeful, angry, disappointed, cynical. Some voices are in the ascendancy (parents?), while others (teachers?) are in decline. To what extent does the involvement of these groups in consultation exercises really influence the policies that emerge? What do they feel about the discourse of empowerment and ownership that is employed in political attempts to assure them that they are being taken seriously?

And thirdly, there are the submerged voices of young people, the intended beneficiaries of schooling. These voices are not exactly silent and there are some grounds for thinking that they have a better chance of being heard now than at any time in the

past. The growing international emphasis on children's rights means that governments cannot simply ignore the views of young people.

Scottish legislation states that children have a right to be consulted in matters that directly affect them. The increasing significance of school and college councils, and of the Scottish Youth Parliament, offers further evidence of a changing situation. Once again, however, there is no consistent tone to those voices that are raised – they can be confused, unsure, rebellious, dismissive, appreciative, questioning. Does all this amount to a real increase in democracy or is it simply window dressing? And does it really touch the most challenging and vulnerable groups of young people – those who do not find their experience of school rewarding?

### **Official Voices**

Official voices are the ones that are heard most frequently and, for this reason, I shall have least to say about them. They tell a story of relative success, invoking such terms as partnership, consultation and consensus. Scottish education, according to this view, is a partnership between central and local government, between parents and teachers, and between school and community. In the development of policy there are – the story continues – ample opportunities for people of all kinds (not just professionals) to express their views and contribute to the refinement and improvement of policy. As a result of this process, a consensus emerges which represents the best ideas capable of being translated into practice. Those charged with implementing the ideas take their stewardship of the system seriously and assure us that they can be trusted to serve the best interests of Scottish education.

This story is told in various forms by the leading institutions of Scottish education. As an example, consider this statement from the Annual Report for 2001-02 of HMIE (Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education):

*Our role will continue to be important as we work with a wide range of individuals and groups to ensure that every learner leaving a school, further education college, or involved in community learning and development, has the best possible opportunities to participate as an active citizen in Scotland, Europe and beyond in the century ahead.*

The same document informs us that HMIE were awarded the Charter Mark for excellence in public service. The self-image of the inspectorate is revealing:

*We aspire to be influential, valued and respected by achieving excellence in all we do. We will exemplify the values of integrity, honesty, objectivity and impartiality and ensure that our activities are: independent; responsive; fair; open.*



Similar statements can readily be found in the self-publicity documents produced by other agencies. In its Newsletter of September 2002, under the heading *A Year of Success for the Council*, the General Teaching Council for Scotland congratulated itself on overtaking its key 'strategic objectives', including 'maintaining and enhancing the quality of teaching', 'maintaining standards of professional conduct and competence', and 'enhancing the status and standing of teachers and teaching'. Again, Learning and Teaching Scotland, in its Annual Report for 2001-2002, located itself 'at the heart of many of the developments taking place in Scottish education today', drawing particular attention to its role in 'building meaningful relationships and partnerships with others involved in the educational community'.

People who hold high office in organisations like to think well of themselves and generally their power enables them to do so. They are able to shape the dominant discourse which purports to explain what happens: this is what is meant by narrative privilege. They can tell the 'approved' story which is repeated by subordinates and supported by other senior people in similar organisations through the processes of networking. This then becomes the 'received wisdom'. For most of the time, this method of maintaining narrative privilege works quite well. It is only when things go seriously wrong that it begins to break down. The clearest example of this was the examinations debacle of 2000 when the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) failed to release the results of a significant number of candidates in an accurate and timely manner. I have no wish to go over the details of this episode which are well-documented in a number of places – including the reports of parliamentary enquiries and, more polemically, in Lindsay Paterson's book *Crisis in the Classroom*. What was interesting, as far as the present analysis is concerned, was the pattern of denial and blame that emerged among the various parties: politicians, SEED officials, inspectors, SQA board members, SQA employees were all disinclined to accept responsibility. To have described them, at the height of the crisis, as ferrets in a sack would have been to do a disservice to the noble ferret. The one thing they were agreed on was that the computer technology was not up to coping with the demands of Higher Still. In retrospect, the SQA episode may have done some good in that it served to disturb the complacency of the leadership class in Scottish education. But the capacity of official voices to reinstate themselves should not be underestimated. It is not only in the political world that damaged reputations can be rescued through skilful spin-doctoring.

To sum up what I have to say about the story told by official voices, it is in the main (notwithstanding the SQA episode) a story of success and progress, in which those who enjoy narrative privilege are able to write their own version of events. It demonstrates the importance of discursive control – that is, the power to set the agenda using forms of language that reinforce their own position and give them the authority to dictate the terms of public debate. In a very real sense, language is power. As Stephen Ball says: 'Discourses are about what can be said, and thought, but also about who can speak, when, where, and with what authority'.

## Unofficial Voices

Here we are in more varied territory where there is no single narrative that is representative. And it would be presumptuous of me to attempt to tell the stories of many of the stakeholders in Scottish education. There is an important sense in which people must be able to tell their own stories, not have them mediated by a third party. For example, parental voices have become more influential in recent years and the perspective of parents as they have sought to make themselves heard, and encountered the obstructions of professionals and bureaucrats, is an important part of any overall account of Scottish education. Judith Gillespie of the Scottish Parent Teacher Council is particularly well placed to tell this story and she has a chapter which does precisely that in the second edition of *Scottish Education* due to be published in the autumn of 2003.

Other organisations also have their unofficial stories to tell – e.g. the Educational Institute of Scotland, the largest teachers' union, in its negotiations over the McCrone settlement; the Confederation of British Industry as it seeks to ensure that transferable skills such as enterprise and working as part of a team are represented in the curriculum. And then there are the accounts of academic colleagues and pressure groups who work in important fields addressing issues of race, gender and disability. The whole social justice agenda yields many examples of unofficial voices seeking to make themselves heard in arenas that might help to advance their aims. Such individuals and organisations face difficult strategic decisions – e.g. about whether to adopt 'insider' or 'outsider' approaches: that is, whether to make polite representations through 'proper channels' and carefully cultivated networks, or whether to adopt a high-risk, high-profile campaigning stance which may alienate rather than persuade. Important issues of political judgement come into play here.

Rather than attempt to represent other people's voices, I have chosen to illustrate unofficial stories by recounting two episodes in which I have had some personal involvement in the first very limited, in the second more extensive. In doing so, I am locating myself as an unofficial voice, a positioning that may be open to question. I shall return to my own position within this classification at the end.

The introduction of Higher Still courses in the upper secondary school was a controversial policy, which had to be postponed twice and which provoked a great deal of critical comment from teachers. There was general agreement that reform was needed and that the traditional divide between academic and vocational programmes of study was no longer tenable. At the same time, the details of what was proposed, particularly with respect to assessment, were regarded as over-complex and lacking in credibility. One of the most vocal groups questioning the proposals was the Scottish Association of Teachers of Language and Literature (SATOLL). The leading figures in the association were the late Tony McManus and John Aberdein, who between them wrote a series of reasoned articles and letters to the educational press and to *The Herald* and *The Scotsman*. These failed to produce any official response. SATOLL then produced a

pamphlet under the title *Sense and Worth: Scottish Education, the Teaching of English and the Higher Still Programme*, which made the case at greater length and cited various 'authorities' (including myself – probably a bad move) in support of their case. A copy of the pamphlet was sent to SEED, with a covering letter from Tony McManus. At the very least, this might have been expected to produce a polite acknowledgement. Instead, the pamphlet was returned very quickly along with the original covering letter on which the words 'returned herewith' had been written. There was no signature.

This is a minor but revealing episode which illustrates an attempt to discount unofficial voices by simply ignoring them. No effort was made to engage with the arguments that SATOLL was advancing. The hope was that the protests would simply die out if official attention were withheld. The irony was that the strategy failed. Eventually a committee had to be set up to recommend changes to the original proposals for the Higher Still English course and, although what emerged from this did not fully satisfy the critics, it represented a modest victory.

The second example centres on another pamphlet which sought to influence thinking about educational policy. It was written by Professor Tom Bryce and myself, as the first publication in a series produced by the universities of Strathclyde and Glasgow under the general title of *Synergy for the Scottish Parliament*. The idea was to provide background information and analysis for the newly elected Members of the Scottish Parliament on a range of policy issues (education, local government, health, housing). Reactions to the education pamphlet from MSPs, directors of education and academics were generally favourable, with one university issuing it to all its students on the one-year postgraduate teacher training course. There was, however, an exception. A senior member of the inspectorate wrote to the vice-principals of the two universities complaining about the content of the pamphlet on the grounds that it was not a good piece of research, that it lacked originality and vision, and failed to offer any new insights. One sentence stated: 'The authors appear to be ignorant of, or unwilling to give credit to, the complex process whereby practitioners, policymakers, HMI and researchers interact with each other in an inclusive way to develop new thinking, with ministers and parliament taking final decisions'.

This reaction is partly explicable in terms of fears on the part of the inspectorate that they would be subject to increased accountability from MSPs – particularly if those MSPs were equipped to ask penetrating questions. (This fear turned out to be justified as the status of the inspectorate was subsequently reduced following the SQA episode.) Much more important, however, was what the letter revealed about official channels of influence. Tom Bryce and I had placed our work in the public domain. We had no objections to people criticising it in public: that is a normal part of the cut and thrust of academic debate. What we did object to, however, was someone using power behind the scenes to try to discredit us, without being prepared to engage in direct communication with us. Such action makes a mockery of the rhetoric of openness and responsiveness

which is frequently invoked by officials in justifying Scottish approaches to policy-making.

For unofficial voices to make themselves heard, they must be persistent, well-informed and resistant to discouragement from professionals and bureaucrats who routinely think they know best. They must be prepared for the well-tried techniques which people who possess power use to discount or discredit those who are either seeking to get items onto the policy agenda or are simply offering an alternative analysis to that preferred by officialdom. It would, however, be a mistake to characterise what happens as some kind of carefully coordinated conspiracy. Rather, it is best understood as the automatic deployment of socially assimilated norms of behaviour acquired through gradual initiation into a set of cultural practices that elite groups have found to be advantageous to themselves. The conventions of the civil service – which have been taken up by non-departmental public bodies, including those that are responsible for many aspects of Scottish education (GTCS, LTS, SQA) – represent one of the clearest expressions of these tendencies.

### **Submerged Voices**

If unofficial voices struggle to make themselves heard, how much harder it is for the submerged voices? I want to lead into this part of my argument by mentioning a book published more than 20 years ago which made a deep impression on me at the time and indeed still remains with me. *Tell Them From Me*, edited by Lesley Gow and Andrew McPherson, consisted of revealing written comments (complete with mis-spellings) made by school pupils about a year after they left school.

Particular attention was given in the study to those pupils who had gained no formal qualifications (the 'non-certificate' pupils, pre-Standard Grade). In many respects it was a deeply depressing but also highly illuminating picture that emerged. The pupils told stories of boredom, rejection, humiliation, neglect, punishment, truancy, and the irrelevance of what they learned for the world of work. What came across was the strength of feeling and sincerity of many of the comments – and they made painful reading for those of us professionally involved in teaching.

Gow and McPherson did not claim that the pupils' accounts represented the truth about the situations that are described. But they did argue that they offered a perspective that it would be unwise to ignore:

*We have two reasons for taking the pupil voice seriously. First, it is dangerous to proscribe categories of evidence, to treat as inconsequential the reaction of any person to what we do. Second, helping the pupil to speak and understand, to reflect on experience, to locate it in wider contexts and set it against other examples, is surely in itself an educative enterprise.*

In their commentary on their findings, Gow and McPherson also make the important point that although it is teachers who get the brunt of the blame in the pupils' accounts (and occasionally some words of praise) there are groups and agencies beyond the classroom and the school that must bear some of the responsibility – there are a few references in the pupils' stories to politicians, the government and bureaucrats, but none to inspectors, advisers or directors of education. Another way of putting this would be to say that what is missing is an understanding of the structure of power and the importance of voice in understanding how policy-making works.

But all that was more than 20 years ago. Surely things have changed for the better? In some respects they have. Pupil voices are taken more seriously – but, from their viewpoint, still not seriously enough. Here are two extracts from pupil comments gathered as part of a recent research study:

*There is a pupil council but the headteacher comes to the meetings so you can't really say what you think – well you can, but he always says you're wrong.*

*We do get a say and they [the teachers] do listen, but not necessarily anything is done about it. It's as if they are trying to prove they are listening but they don't pay attention to what we think.*

In other words, from the pupils' perspective, there is an element of tokenism in the formal mechanisms that are now in place in many schools to allow them to have their say. To make this point is not to suggest that pupils' voices should always be acted upon, or that they are invariably right in what they say. They might be ill-informed or unfair or mischievous in their comments. But, for the same educational reasons advanced by Gow and McPherson, the case for at least listening seriously to their point of view is compelling.

An example of things moving in the right direction is the *Learning with Care* report on 'looked after children' (2001), the 11,000 or so children and young people in Scotland who are looked after by local authorities. This report drew extensively on the experience of young people themselves and the appendices containing their comments make very interesting reading. So too does the report *For Scotland's Children* (Scottish Executive, 2002), which sought to promote better integrated children's services, though some of the comments here echo those in *Tell Them From Me*. For example, 'The professionals who spoke to me made me feel ashamed'. Or again, 'They didn't listen to me or even let me finish my sentences'. And as one thoughtful professional remarked: 'Reaching the children is very difficult. The children who say least are of most concern'.

So there is still some way to go before the rhetoric of empowerment and ownership really convinces. This is especially true of the most marginalised and disaffected groups. It is estimated that 30% of all children in Scotland live in poverty. More than 40% of pupils in Glasgow are entitled to free school meals. Then there is the position of

groups such as travellers and ethnic minorities. Social exclusion is officially defined as a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, poor skills, low inadequate housing, high crime environment, bad health and family breakdown. To that list might be added the lack of a voice in places that might make a difference. We know from official statistics that exclusion rates from school are disproportionately high among pupils entitled to free meals, pupils with a Record of Needs and those being looked after by a local authority. These are real and continuing problems which should make us cautious about claiming too much for the advances that have been made.

There are many voices which are still submerged or silent. A central task for education is helping those marginalised groups to find their voice, giving them the skills and confidence to express it, and encouraging them to challenge the official voices which determine so many aspects of their lives. Meaningful social inclusion will inevitably – and rightly – be uncomfortable for the traditional political, bureaucratic and professional classes.

## **Conclusion**

Finally, let me comment on my own position in relation to the three voices I have invoked in telling my three stories about Scottish education. To some extent, I might be described as an official voice, in the sense that I enjoy a degree of narrative privilege – I have opportunities to speak and write and teach, and so get my views into the public domain. But I continue to reject many aspects of the official narrative and have not been subject to overtures to join any of the committees and working groups that, in policy matters, have steering capacity. I did discover last year that I was on a list of possible interviewees for the Education, Culture and Sport Committee's enquiry into the future of Scottish education. No invitation arrived. Just as well – it would have put my resolve not to keep bad company to a severe test.

I suppose I might more accurately be described as an unofficial voice. I take issue with the received wisdom about Scottish education and see my role as a critical and questioning one. In this sense, I try to provide an 'outsider' perspective. But, at the same time, I am inescapably part of the educational system. A great deal of my time involves working with novice and experienced teachers, with schools and other agencies, to try to improve educational thinking and practice. This inevitably creates tensions as I try to negotiate guidelines and constraints about which I may have serious reservations. From a research perspective, however, this has certain advantages. I am part of the system but on the periphery of the policy community – this means that I have access to information, documentation and people that enable me to gain some insight into the policy process. If I were a complete outsider, that would be much more difficult. Nevertheless, there are many areas where my knowledge is lacking – e.g. links between Scottish Executive Education Department in Edinburgh and the Department for Education and Skills in London, or between Scottish Higher Education Funding Council and the Scottish

Executive. I see it as part of my job to try to cast some light into the dark corners of Scottish education.

This, of course, can raise rather difficult questions of trust for those who deal with me. If they tell me things, what use might I make of the information? In practice, I have found this less of a problem than it might appear at first sight. In fact, one of the things that keeps me going is that I know there are many 'insiders' – i.e. people who are more centrally involved in the policy community than I am, and who are, by virtue of their position, much more constrained in what they can say – who share many of my views. I occasionally receive interesting material in plain brown envelopes – which I appreciate but which I then have to check carefully in case I am being 'set up'.

What about my position in relation to submerged voices? My colleagues would be quick to confirm that I could not, with any credibility, claim to be a submerged voice. But one of the reasons I am keen to assert the importance of submerged voices is that, with only a slightly different set of circumstances, I might have become one. In common with many people who go into teaching, I am a first generation university graduate – the only member of my family who had the chance to go to university. This was not because I was any more intelligent than my brothers and sisters, simply that my position in the family, as the youngest, meant that I had opportunities that they missed. One of the real achievements of comprehensive education is that it has helped to widen access to higher education for many people who previously were denied that experience. The comprehensive system has demonstrated clearly that old notions of a pool of limited ability are mistaken. This has profound implications not only at the level of individuals but for society as a whole. The new Scotland desperately needs to make the most of the talents of all its citizens. This involves, among other things, bringing new people into the many arenas that shape public policy. In an important sense, it requires a political revolution in the form of new groups of people coming forward to make their contribution. That will, of course, threaten the traditional leadership classes. It involves enabling individuals and communities to move beyond the fears and passivities identified by Smout.

The new Scotland needs people who can respond constructively to the global pressures for change, who are willing to take on responsibility, who are prepared to question established authority and tradition. And if I am right in my analysis, its implications extend far beyond the educational system. It can be applied to other areas of public policy – the law, medicine, the media, religion, politics. In all of these fields, there are official voices which represent power and narrative privilege: there are unofficial voices, some of which try to challenge the received wisdom but many of which run the risk of being ignored, marginalised or discredited: and there are submerged voices whose capacity to make themselves heard is as yet undeveloped.

There is still a long way to go before the rhetoric of equality, democracy and social justice, which sustains the self-image of 'official' Scotland, becomes a reality. We need to

continue to ask hard questions about the adequacy of the existing professional and political establishment, and the institutions that support them, to meet the requirements of the 21st century. An essential part of this process is a capacity for self-criticism, and an outward-looking culture that shows strong intellectual engagement with global ideas. These are necessary preconditions for the promotion of genuine civic activism.



# A spirit of freedom

R F Mackenzie

2004

*R F Mackenzie, educational philosopher and rebel teacher, died in 1987. Many years later, his family offered to the Scottish Review this previously unpublished paper.*

Long ago, the fishermen on the Aberdeenshire coast would go out to the headland and look over the sea and the face of the sky, and, out of a gut reaction, announce: 'There is a change working'. I sense just such a change working in the thoughts and feelings of people throughout the world, the turning of a tide in the affairs of men, 'such a tide as moving seems asleep'. The educational revolution has to do with the whole nature of our life on earth. Its sources of inspiration, the deep springs from which it draws its life, are the inner promptings of the human heart, the vague questions, the doubts, often unspoken, that have troubled humanity throughout its tenure of the planet. Concerning the upsurge of one such question in the mind of one of his characters, Neil Gunn said: 'You saw it – but you have not yet brought it into your head in order to put words on it'. The change that is happening is that more human beings are becoming aware that they should have the freedom to bring those private doubts into their heads and put words on them.

Down the ages the minorities, brutally imposing their ideology on humanity, have tried to make such thoughts unthinkable and therefore unutterable. We, the bottom people, emerge from our hidey-holes and begin hesitantly to articulate these doubts. I imagine the unspoken thoughts of the French farm-workers in the Millais picture, *The Angelus*, as they straighten their backs, relieved to have the excuse for a rest when they are called upon by the bell to think on time and eternity. Glimmers of thoughts must have crossed their minds, asking what the whole business signified. 'Surely this back-breaking toil from the early morn to night isn't what life on earth was meant to be about.' Such subversive thoughts must have teetered on the brink of consciousness throughout human history. 'What if the top people also don't really know?' The Greek slaves must have wondered sometimes about the confident statements of those distinguished Greeks sitting on Mars Hill and philosophising in the sunshine. The Roman legionnaires, goose-stepping in Caesar's triumphs, maybe asked what there was in it for them. Sometimes the doubts surfaced and were firmed into action. The Mayan peasants had doubts about their priests who were immersed in sacred mathematical calculations, and they drifted away and the priestly edifice crumbled.

It is a very slow process, the transubstantiation by which unquestioning loyalty and homage, offered during half a lifetime, disintegrates and emerges in some other form. It took a long time for the friends and neighbours of the Tolpuddle martyrs, frightened and

maintaining a low profile, to come to their own conclusions about the aristocracy and their kept clergymen. Throughout history, the religious priests have been so closely and sometimes clearly identified with the political powers, defending them and reinforcing their control over their subjects' minds, that political doubts merge into pervasive religious doubt. The fellahin, toiling on the pyramids, shrank in fear at the thought of doubting the god-king, the pharaoh, but the doubt was there, and kept surfacing down the centuries. Highland crofters, counselled by the Presbyterian ministers to accept their fate when the lairds cleared them from their lands, ventured alone into a no man's land of thought, groping for some vision of the inscrutable Presbyterian god that would make sense to them. It's usually a lonely quest because the strength of contrary opinion is so massive that the individual seeker hesitates to share his doubts. The controllers invented a word, blasphemy, to scare off humanity from such impious speech.

But sometimes an outside group articulates thoughts that have hitherto been only wispy clouds, giving them a firm outline. The 7:84 Theatre Company, touring the clachans and cities of Scotland, draw attention to the torture inflicted on Scottish political prisoner John Maclean, stone-breaking in the quarries attached to Peterhead prison, and the audience file the memory. The image of the gentlemanly Tory has a provisional question mark set against it. The file, once opened, is available for the storage of other related information bearing question marks. The law-lords' mistakes of judgement make us ask ourselves: 'Why have we invested the law with an aura of sanctity, as if ex-public-schoolboys become endowed with wisdom when they don their wigs?' The published statements of scientists employed by drug companies and asbestos companies go into the file. So does the *International Herald Tribune's* headline: 'Bumper Grain Harvest Around World Raises Fear of a Food Crisis'. And the report that a multinational company has persuaded African villagers that it is fashionable to get rid of the thatched roofs of their houses and save up for a tin roof.

Wraiths of ideas take shape and swirl in people's heads and disintegrate and reform. We are still in the indeterminate period that Arnold described, wandering between two worlds, one dead, the other (he thought) powerless to be born. But I think he was unduly pessimistic, unaware of the events that were happening deep in the minds of people all over the earth just beginning to put clumsy words to their thoughts. I think Arnold's contemporary, Arthur Hugh Clough, may turn out to be the better prophet.

*For while the tired waves, vainly breaking,  
Seem here no painful inch to gain,  
Far back, through creeks and inlets making,  
Comes silent, flooding in, the main.*

Most of us fluctuate between these two views of our future. But even if the odds are on Arnold's new world, powerless to be born, the human will to survive makes us continue

the struggle. How can we teachers become enablers, obstetricians, helping into birth the concepts already kicking inside us?

The question deserves an answer as practical and workable and concrete as we can make it. In a stimulating book, *The Future in Our Hands: What we can all do towards the shaping of a better world*, a Norwegian engineer, Erik Dammann, says that many of society's apparent problems would be solved if people working in ideas could all be persuaded to take up physical labour for a year. 'I believe their inability to solve practical problems is partly due to the fact that they have gradually become far too isolated as theorists – that their thinking has become far too removed from real life because they have never been connected with physical actions and earthbound problems.'

Dammann has traced one cause of the failure of education to cope with society's problems. Unlike scientists, who are expected to inquire clearly into and solve scientific problems, such as going to the moon, the people who deal with the problems of society have had a high-priestly education which exempts them from such inquiry. In a past generation, the man who had studied Euripides and Virgil at Oxford was considered qualified to govern the Sudan. In the present generation, he is considered qualified to advise the ministers on monetarism and nuclear policy. It's beautiful magic, but alas, it doesn't work. The problems of society are not clearly analysed. They are wrapped in high-priestly terms and, when the answers don't work out, the cultural priests don't blame themselves, they blame the recalcitrance of ordinary people.

This is where Dammann's explanation comes in. All of us have encountered the recalcitrance of material things, the damp patch on the ceiling that obdurately persists after we've replaced the slates, the car that continues to stall at the traffic lights after we've re-checked the ignition points, the bicycle tyre that goes flat after we've patched the inner tube and tested it in a bucket of water. We realise sadly that we have to inquire further. But in many schools, when recalcitrant pupils are encountered, there is no further inquiry. The obstreperous language with which some educationalists lambast their pupils is like the kick which the exasperated cyclist directs at the flat tyre of his bicycle. Many educationalists don't feel the need to submit their curriculum to practical tests any more than they inquired in detail into how classics qualified a man to lay down the law on monetarism. They accept the hallowed answers of the priesthood.

It is this otherworldliness, this irrelevance of much of 'cultural' education, that conveys to many people that education doesn't have much to contribute even when we meet the problems of real, everyday life. An Aberdeenshire farmer gave his foreman instructions for spreading sacks of artificial manure over a large field. When he returned in the evening, he found that all the manure sacks were empty but a third of the field remained to be manured. He remonstrated with the foreman. 'You should have divided the area of the field by the number of sacks to see how much ground each sack had to cover. One acre is 4,840 square yards. You knew that!'

'God almighty,' said the foreman, 'they learned us that at the school but I never thought it would be any use to me'.

Culture should be as directly relevant to our lives as arithmetic, helping us to frame the questions and think out the answers. But when even the arithmetic taught in school is regarded as having little to contribute to the problems of everyday life, we realise how far the classroom lessons have been ritualised, losing contact with reality.

The educational revolution will re-establish the contact. It will start with intelligibility. No society is likely to live happily when three-quarters of its pupils and its adults are excluded from full participation in the understanding of its culture and its government, when culture and government are esoteric studies, a priestly preserve. These two things, culture and government, are conducted like a game of tennis outside an ancient manor-house. The rest of us are spectators, permitted to learn the rules and appreciate the skills so that we can applaud appropriately. We may even get a friendly smile if we retrieve from the undergrowth a ball that has been driven too far out of court. But that's as far as it goes. Now, following Dammann's advice, since we are determined to participate in this absorbing game, we sit down and direct our practical attention to the causes of our exclusion and the steps we should take in order to gain entry.

Controversy immediately arises. The tennis players say we haven't the intelligence to play the game. I'm saying that we don't have to accept that segment until we've done further research into the nature of intelligibility and the impediments that shackle our pupils and adults when they try to encompass it. As an engineer surveys his tools for their suitability to the work he wants them to do, we have to examine words, our tools of communication. The schools give the impression of carrying out this examination. The exercise is called 'grammar', but it's a traditional ceremony, a ritual performed for its own sake, insulated from its purpose of aiding understanding. At school I learned to write reasonably good English but I never understood the lessons on grammar.

Priests do this all the time, ensuring the carrying out of rites without inquiring into the purpose for which the rites were initiated; they adjure their congregation or classroom to believe that the performance of the rite does them good. Grammar is supposed to do you good in the same way as Latin does you good, or art, or history, or French, or any other curriculum ritual. The educational revolution asks: 'How does it do you good?' The examination of language does do you good, but not at all in the way that the 'grammar' rituals are performed.

We want our study of language to be of as concrete value as the study of the fuel system of an internal combustion engine. What is it that is restricting the fuel supply? What is interfering with the ignition? Did the teachers use abstract words beyond the pupils' experience and scope to translate into concrete terms? While the pupil lingered over a particular word, trying to relate it to his experience, was the teacher driving remorselessly ahead, unaware that the pupil was no longer a passenger in the coach? Have we adults lost contact with the world of children and adolescents, its idiom and

tentative speech-patterns, its groping efforts to link one of our words to its perceived reality?

Matthew Arnold claimed that only a minority are capable of making fine distinctions but I doubt if he had conducted much imaginative inquiry, as a school inspector, into the speech of working-class children which would have entitled him to make the statement. We need much more detailed research into comprehension and the nature of incomprehension.

The school atmosphere is uncongenial to the carrying out of fruitful inquiry of this kind. Schools lack comeliness and conviviality, they are too compartmented to allow of the uncompetitive sharing of ideas, the engaging of different abilities and insights in a joint enterprise. They divorce the artistic from the intellectual, the dreamers from the hard realists, the thinkers from doers, in an artificial apartheid. But we are all artists and scientific inquirers, dreamers and practical people, who like to make things that work; and all of these qualities, that exist neglected in our children, are needed if the possibilities of earth-life that have haunted the dreams of our predecessors – the Garden of the Hesperides, Atlantis and Shangri-la and Utopia – are to be nursed into reality. Schools are too cold and forbidding to be a hearth in the glow of which the young learn about their heritage and prepare to take over what we hand to them.

Starting from the here-and-now, how do we achieve the emancipation which would allow us to begin the remarking of our education? The first step is to abolish the external examinations. Until we overthrow this Bastille of the old regime, there will be no educational revolution, no freedom to ask questions about the upbringing of our children. When teachers are freed from the task of making pupils accumulate information and memorise accepted opinions, the school ceases to be a punitive institution and the teachers will take their place among the research workers of our society, inquiring into the making of a real democracy. They will respond. Teachers, drudging through the examination syllabus, become changed people when presented with the opportunity to do original work.

We'll bring the parents into the classroom. One way in which they can help is to tell us what it was that they missed at school, the information, skills, experience that would have been valuable to them in later life. Snatches of disappointment are voiced in random comments, overheard: 'I wish I'd really learned one foreign language'. 'I wish I could have spent a year learning about motor engines. Then I'd have been able to go off on my own, exploring Africa in a Land Rover, or sailing round the Aegean.' 'I wish we'd been able to follow through a piece of scientific research for a whole term, sometimes improvising our own equipment.' 'I wish they had taught us many more skills – skiing, gliding, horse-riding, squash, living off the countryside.'

But there is a more general contribution that the parents could make. The elites, the officer class, the 'academics', the 'top people', all those groups 'set apart' like the Pharisees in the New Testament, are lacking in some constituent of fundamental wisdom, perhaps

because their upbringing has given them more experience in the manipulation of words than in the management of realities, or perhaps because power has corrupted them and intense competitiveness has hardened them and made them self-centred. We need a richer wisdom and a greater simplicity than their select upbringing has given them. We need a greater readiness to admit error than their insecurity permits them; they haven't the confidence to put their embattled advantages at risk by inviting us in.

One writer has suggested that the participation of parents in running the schools may turn out to be the best way in which all adults will become fully involved in running their country. Practice in helping to frame the policy and organise the practical affairs of the school would give them confidence to tackle wider-ranging activities. Parent-teacher co-operation could be an embryo that would grow into a living democracy. I think he could be right. The country will be better off when the majority contribute their common sense to the solution of problems that have hitherto baffled the minority.

The old system, which ignored the parents and forced upon the young the rigid, priestly ideas of elder statesmen, created the generation gap. The new dispensation will be as blissfully unaware of a generation gap as an African village was. The young and old members of the community, listening to one another, learning from one another, will be less likely to try to put anything across on one another. Parents of very young children are bombarded with questions, and they wonder why the questions dry up when the children go to secondary school. When the examinations disappear, the bombardment will recommence and parents will understand more fully the role of the teachers in facing this bombardment. Teachers will be free to ransack the riches of film and radio and television to provide answers for the tumultuous questions that will assail them.

In more leisurely days, BBC script-writer Rhoda Power made a 20-minute programme an art form. Her series *How Things Began* gave to young listeners a vivid picture of the story of life on the earth. Before then, most youngsters had no idea at all of where they came from, the dark backward and abyss of time. I think she was one of the great educators of our century. One early ITV programme, *The Story of a River*, traced the Dordogne from the Puy de Sancy to the sea, describing the difference between the mountaineers of its source and the inhabitants of the richer lands of the Gironde. For the first time many pupils realised that where you live makes a difference.

We shall exploit much more fully the skills of film photography to help children to know their heritage. The concrete reality of photographed material will remove the unintelligibility that at present clouds our word-based education. We shall take our pupils in aeroplanes, helicopters and gliders to show them what their home-planet looks like from outside. If they are to get our earth-life into perspective, they need to look down on it from a great height and also more intimately from a few hundred feet.

We'll read to them Lewis Grassie Gibbon's *Scots Quair* and Sholokhov's *And Quiet Flows the Don* and *Virgin Soil Uplifted*, and fly them over the Mearns and the Don basin and exchange pupils so that Ukrainians and Scots can understand that they have

almost everything in common. Rural children of the Mearns of Scotland will visualise with total understanding the scene that Sholokhov describes outside the new collective stable on a winter's evening when seven or eight previous owners of the horses would hang around, each concerned to see that his bay horse, or the little mare that he had tended solicitously from birth, was getting a fair share of the hay.

Capitalism doesn't permit such ventures. Inbuilt in its system is a requirement to economise on the upbringing of the very great majority of the young. The educational revolution will regard our children as our most precious assets, not to be economised upon. It will employ the most imaginative of the film and television producers to explain very clearly to the young, the long back-story of their local area, the glaciers scraping out the river valley and leaving the scratch-marks still visible on the rocks, the early colonisers extorting a living from the valley and the seashore, the lords immuring themselves in thick-walled castles, the Earl of Montrose savaging Aberdeen on behalf of his political-religious beliefs.

We'd have an intermission there to home in on the details of this story. Most of the people who control the history ideas communicated to the young say that Montrose was a noble character. It is not the function of the teacher in the educational revolution to support or deny Montrose's admission to the Scottish Valhalla. What we have to do is to tell them the Montrose story as clearly and fairly as we can. The forced march in a snowy winter over the mountains to Inverlochy, the endurance, the heroism, the mental conflict, the loyalty however mistaken, the murders, all of these form a story that will keep children from play and old men from the chimney-corner.

Capitalism's educators maintain that the majority of teenagers are unqualified to adjudicate amongst the differing opinions about Montrose, and should sit down and memorise the textbook conclusions reached by experts. We who support the educational revolution say: 'Not so'. Teachers are professional people who are to be trusted to dig up all the facts about Montrose and present them to the pupils. The pupils have the subtlety and the generosity to decide for themselves what manner of man he was. And they have the gumption also to realise, as they balance the ideas and feelings, tragically contradictory to each other, running round in Montrose's head, that the same kinds of heart-breaking decisions, although in the idiom of the 20th century, will confront them. What I am trying to emphasise, in the teeth of present educational practice, is that no democracy will endure that denies to these youngsters acknowledgement of their ability to size up these issues for themselves.

Then we'd resume the saga of our developing country and world, the growing towns, the awful factories, cholera, the reluctant concessions made by aristocrats and industrialists and archbishops. The present dispensation teaches our history as if it described something that was over and done with, like the Roman Empire. They give the pupils the impression that the major problems of society have been solved; everything has been settled and bestowed and zipped up. We will unzip the package and open up

many of the questions again. We'll tell the pupils of the provisional answers advanced by Buddha and Jesus, and St Benedict in his educational experiment at Cassino, by Adam Smith and Tom Paine and Karl Marx. We'll apply these answers to present problems, in the way that Dammann suggested, to see if their answers can tell us where we should go from here.

We'll be particularly concerned with basic values. Why, for example, was Napoleon so keen to marry into a European royal family? 'He might have been the father of a new world. He was content to be the son-in-law of the old.' Did he feel, like an American tycoon, that material success was too earthy and needed to be validated by this sublimation of nobility? We'll help our pupils to analyse this 'nobility'. Two hundred years ago, the new American revolution sent its representatives to the ancient courts of Europe. Grey reality was contrasted unfavourably with colourful pageant. H G Wells described it in *The Outline of History*. 'Some writers, even American writers, impressed by the artificial splendours of the European courts and by the tawdry and destructive exploits of a Frederick the Great or a Great Catherine, display a snobbish shame of something homespun about these makers of America. They feel that Benjamin Franklin at the court of Louis XVI, with his long hair, his plain clothes, and his gawky manner, was sadly lacking in aristocratic distinction.' We'll read to our working-class pupils passages from today's popular dailies in which we plodding, homespun characters are contrasted unfavourably with the dashing headline heroes.

History repeats itself, or nearly repeats itself, as it follows a spiralling, cyclic course. Life becomes intolerable for slaves, or wage slaves, soldiers, school pupils. The soldiers go berserk, the pupils smash the classroom. Improvements are made, and life goes more smoothly until there is another build-up of intolerable conditions. The cycle is caused by the determination of the minority to re-establish control after a bout of concessions. Because of its restricted upbringing in which minority people communicate mainly with minority people, this minority has a narrower understanding of the nature of life on the earth than it would like the majority to think. It doesn't understand (or acts as if it didn't understand) that growth continues all the time, and that, if the circumstances of living don't alter to accommodate growth, there are strains.

Milton in his *Areopagitica* emphasises the need of a healthy society to be open to new challenges and not to seek to censor them, from whatever source they came. But the minority doesn't allow for growth and change. Its picture of the majority doesn't change down the ages. As long as the members of the majority give no trouble they are praised as loyal, law-abiding, God-fearing, industrious, co-operative. When they step out of line they are anathematised as recalcitrant, atheistic, anarchic, responsible for 'senseless' destruction, the mob. The various priests are the minority's officers whose function is to contain revolt and inhibit change. They have been remarkably successful for millennia. They have, for the most part, contained the majority, keeping them in a state of physical and intellectual subjection.



There are some indications that that era in human history, the era of ruthless division of humanity into controlling minority and subjected majority, may be moving to its close. It will be a major event in what Heine called the 'Liberation War of Humanity' when the thought-control, which the minority's educational priests exercise over the majority, is overthrown. The purpose of the educational revolution is to do away with the South African-type apartheid which has divided humanity for millennia.

What is surprising is that it has continued for so long. That long duration shows how effective has been the shut-down not merely on the asking of questions but on any general awareness that we might all participate in the running of our society. The totality of the shut-down may be difficult for future generations to comprehend. We were wholly immersed (as in a river) in the thought-feeling continuum in which we had our being, carried this way and that by the movement of the current.

Through my education, I never felt that I was included in policy-making, asked for an opinion that counted, even at the university. History was an army exercise and the instructions would come down to us from above and our education qualified us in different degrees to carry out these instructions. The nearest we got to the controllers of power was when we saw an alumnus of the university who had returned, laden with honours, to a graduation ceremony from service in the far-flung empire, a grand vizier, and even he, we felt, was still only a servant of the mystery. In no sense was the human venture our venture. (Politics was about getting a few shillings' increase in pay.) We never got round to the ghost of an inkling that we might have something to say about how we would choose to spend our time on the earth on which we had so inexplicably appeared.

None of us could get into the holy places, the council chamber where the major decisions about our lives were made, far less bang on the council table and say: 'Hang on a minute. We have a few things to say about this'. There was never any question about accepting the rulings of a remote, impalpable authority beyond our ken. We accepted this higher power as we accepted the weather. There was no way we could begin to doubt it, or question the evaluation it put on our modest abilities. There was nobody, nobody at all, to whom we could have turned for support and encouragement in raising a small voice of protest (if we had been so minded).

The kindly-disposed and distinguished and wise elders raised a finger of warning if I continued in questioning even a minor issue, like the insistence on Latin, and people in whom I had learned to put my trust leaned over, gently deprecating this breach of manners. It was unseemly. Our elders gently and firmly 'put us in our place'. They liked us and had helped us and now helped us further by saving us from ourselves, from the solecism of raising our voice in a holy place. They said they appreciated this demonstration of the Scottish spirit of independence but there was the Greek doctrine of the mean, and, like them, we would learn as we grew older, and we would measure our words. We felt properly reproved, but puzzled. I had vaguely felt that enlightenment meant clarifying issues so that you could reach a clear conclusion. But they said it wasn't

as simple as that. There were imponderables not accessible to ordinary reasoning, to be taken into account, a sense of fitness, of knowing when to hold your peace.

I know now (but I wouldn't have dared to say it then, even if I had discovered it) that what prevented these kindly, scholarly people from giving voice to the truth as they felt it within themselves was not fear but something much more deeply imprinted on them, something of the nature of a hoodoo. It had been handed down for such countless generations that they felt that it had taken on the quality of an instinctive reaction. It continues to be interposed like a filter to prevent people from reaching the conclusion that rational argument would lead them to. It appears when I talk to a churchman and find him intelligent and sensitive and sympathetic, and then we get to the details of the Nicene Creed ('descended into Hell and rose the third day') and the filter comes down and there can be no further discussion. It appears in debates on education when scientists, who question mercilessly every statement in their own field of study, accept with docility the current dogmas on the secondary school curricula.

In *The Anatomy of Power*, J K Galbraith says that the supreme expression of the use of power occurs 'when the person does not know that he or she is being controlled. Belief makes submission not a conscious act of will but a normal, natural manifestation of the approved behaviour. Those who do not submit are deviant'. The central effort of the educational revolution is, as Freire said, to make people conscious of these ancient patterns of deception. The Mephistophelean grandeur of the deception, spanning the centuries, makes Machiavelli and Goebbels appear like small-time, local operators. Our strategy to combat this general anaesthesia, to help people to wake up, is to un-complicate the fundamental issues and persuade people to start asking questions again, the self-same questions they asked or came near to asking when they were children.

The hymn says: 'Tell me the story simply, that I may take it in'. The story is this. Here we are on the surface of a planet spinning round the sun; how should we be spending these three-score years and 10, or four-score years allocated to us? For the first time in human history the opportunity, nay, the necessity, has arrived for everybody to be brought into the search for an answer, evaluating the richness of sexual experience, the peace of the countryside, the liberating effect of art which, as Sir Philip Sidney said, 'claps wings to solid nature', and, weighing these things against the accumulating of goods, or of power over our fellow-colonists of the planet, to give the young some clear understanding which would help them to make their own, independent choice between these things.

We who work in education have to tie our work into that major design. I revert to the confrontation on Mount Carmel in the ninth century BC when the lights were going out in Israel (as today in Europe and the USA) and defeatism had become stronger, and Baal's crowd (as today) were on the up-and-up. I imagine there had been a period of confusing of the issues, of neutrality and opting out, a period of Butskill compromise. I had dismissed the Elijah story as irrelevant to our times, supposing that the god he was

recruiting for was he of Rome and Geneva and Canterbury. But it is possible that the crisis in belief, the gods contrasted, the opposition of values were nearly identical to our own. Baal, the god of Ahab and Jezebel, is the god of Reagan and Thatcher; his values are their values. Elijah cracked the mould of compromise with hammer blows. 'How long halt ye between two opinions? If the Lord be God, follow him: but if Baal, then follow him.' He left no room for neutrality, for opting out. In our world of very rapidly sharpening crisis, that's the choice the teachers are presented with.

They have to decide if their loyalty is to Baal and his values (including docility and defeatism in the majority) or to different values and a different god (requiring them to try and restore humanity's belief in itself).

It will be difficult to restore a confidence that has been so relentlessly and calculatedly undermined, and the high priests of Baal will, of course, continue to confuse our judgement, 'darkening counsel', and above all, diminishing the pupils' self-esteem. This is the main issue on which the teachers will have to take their stand. What kind of people do they really think our youngsters are? Are they the characters that Reagan and Thatcher, the military and the multinationals and their attendant priesthoods say they are: lumpish, credulous, mob-like; or are they something else?

Teachers who have accorded their pupils freedom and respect have seen an upsurge of energy and initiative. Surliness and suspicion are cleared away in a torrent of activity, glazed eyes begin to twinkle, ability sprouts in unexpected places, generosity replaces hostility. We have babied them too long; here in Scotland we have the fittest generation that there has ever been in our history, and teachers have made them sit at their desks and learn their lessons. In Fife, we let them loose and were surprised at their overflowing energy. Some of our 14-year-olds made record crossings of the Mamore Mountains and the Cuillins in Skye, beating adult times. We begin to realise by how much we have under-estimated both the physical and mental ability of the young; and consequently our whole nation.

This down-valuing, de-grading, is a mechanism of the minority to price themselves up and confirm their control over us, and to take away our freedom. It has been challenged often. Milton warned us against them. 'The price of liberty is eternal vigilance.' He was under no misconception about the worth of our people. This was how he assessed them in 1644: 'A nation not slow and dull, but of a quick, ingenious and piercing spirit; acute to invent, subtle and sinewy to discourse, not beneath the reach of any point the highest that human capacity can soar to'.

Part of our contribution is to give to all our pupils an awareness that they can measure up to this assessment, and that history is not the story of a chosen group of kings and captains for whom the rest of us are capable only of hewing wood and drawing water. We teachers have to replace the reverence for institutions with reverence for life, for all human beings, and to give to our pupils the sense that *they* are history, a feeling of the integrity of the whole human race.

# Manifesto on a school wall

Catherine Czerkawska

2009

Seen yesterday, on a wall at our local primary school, alongside a great many pictures of the kids engaged in interesting and, no doubt, worthwhile activities:

*I can evaluate environmental, scientific and technological issues.*

*I can apply critical thinking in new contexts.*

*I can develop and communicate my own beliefs and views of the world.*

*I can make reasoned evaluations.*

*I live as independently as I can.*

*I have a commitment to participate responsibly in political, economic, social and cultural life.*

A couple of children, when gently questioned about these 'affirmations', told us that of course they understood it all, it was 'to do with bullet points'. They could parrot the words, declaring that they 'had done it in class, understood it but couldn't really explain it'. They clearly hadn't the foggiest notion what any of it meant. And no wonder, since your average university student would have trouble unpicking most of the above in any meaningful way. I have trouble unpicking it myself, and the Royal Literary Fund paid me to do this sort of thing with students for four years.

But let's try applying a little critical thinking in this particular context. Can a 10-year-old child even begin to 'evaluate environmental, scientific and technological issues' when an adult finds it difficult, without a good deal of informed (non-tabloid) reading about the issues involved. For children, it presumably means believing what the teacher tells them, which doesn't qualify as 'evaluating' in my book.

Similarly, children can't 'apply critical thinking in new contexts' without being able to understand what 'critical' means, and what a multitude of possible contexts there may be in life. This used to be called the Getting of Wisdom, and there was a certain recognition that it came with years and that it might be wise to tap into the extensive knowledge of somebody else to acquire it.

The same applies in spades to the third precept. How can they 'develop and communicate their own beliefs and views of the world' when their perception of the world is so limited? If a child is learning a new discipline – anything from karate to mathematics – he may genuinely believe that four is a prime number, or that he can split house bricks with his hand, but he will be wrong, no matter his personal 'beliefs and views of the world'. And if nobody has the courage and authority to tell him the

difference between hard fact and ill-informed conjecture, for fear of damaging his fragile self-esteem, he will not go very far in life – or mathematics – and his first port of call after the karate class will be the nearest A&E department.

Nor can children be expected to 'live independently' when they must, of necessity, rely on parents, teachers and friends. The meaning of independence at this age is debatable. If it means making your own bed or learning how to stand up to bullying, that's fine. But then, why not simply say so, instead of dressing it up as an adult concept? Besides, genuine independence may be in direct conflict with the last precept on the list.

If children are expected to live independently, why should they feel any need to 'participate responsibly in political, economic, social and cultural life'? Do the people responsible for these guidelines mean the kind of independence of thought that is free to question everything, including the motives of politicians and educational psychologists; a healthy scepticism about political, economic, social and cultural opinion, coupled with respect for a certain intellectual rigour? Or do they simply want children to become mindlessly model citizens, submitting to everything their political masters suggest, from mass medication to total surveillance?

Finally – and perhaps most important of all – when a large percentage of Scots are leaving school unable to read (surely a prerequisite for independent living and critical thinking), what is meant by pinning such manifestos to a school wall? Who are they for? The parents are either enraged or blinded by the jargon. The kids can't understand them. The teachers are – just possibly – constrained by the unreasonable demands encapsulated in them. The politicians and psychologists who promote them may feel irrationally pleased with their achievements in advocating such woolly-headed garbage in obfuscatory language of the first order. But isn't it time we rose up and told them what to do with their therapeutic precepts? Or would our protests simply be dismissed because – in the pernicious catch-22 of the time – we ourselves must be wrong to disagree because we are carrying 'too much emotional baggage'?

# Class division

Jill Stephenson

2009

There has been much talk recently about the rise in the number of first class degrees awarded by British universities. Is this because of 'dumbing down', or because university entrants are so much better than they used to be? I think we can discount the latter suggestion: there are some very good new students, probably in total more than there used to be. But then there are a lot more students – including plenty of those who have been drilled in how to pass exams but who have little independent intellectual capability. Nevertheless, the reasons for the rise in the number of first class degrees – and also the continued expansion in the number of upper second class degrees – lie elsewhere.

It is perplexing that a Commons select committee – for 'innovation, universities, science and skills', heaven help us – seems so puzzled by all of this given that government has pulled every stunt to ensure that this is the outcome of the pressures that it has exerted on universities. Much of it comes back to the 'paying customers' ethos, and to the pretence that there is, or can be, uniformity across the sector. There is also the very tiresome way in which some newspapers factor a 'how many firsts?' figure into their even more tiresome numerical rating of universities by 'league table'.

Once you encourage the idea that universities are businesses and students are consumers, you can scarcely be surprised if they expect to get what they want – a good degree – whether they merit it or not. The result is that students treat 60% as the pass mark when, in most institutions, the pass mark is 40% and 60% is the entry mark for a 2.1. Students do not appreciate receiving a mark of 57 or 58 – I was recently accused of giving 'a potentially career-damaging mark' when I assessed an essay at 57, a mark that is 17% above the pass level.

Beyond that, some students are not averse to trying to exert pressure on lecturers to revise a perfectly good mark upwards into the first class category. One about whom I know thought to pressure two very junior lecturers in this way. I was called in, as a crusty old codger, to adjudicate. Having written a page of comments on the essay, I suggested that the student take his 68 and run before anyone else looked too closely at it. That was the last we heard of that, although I gather that the same student has continued to complain about perfectly good 2.1 marks that do not match his expectations but do reflect his talent. Perhaps I was wrong: he is, after all, a paying customer, and, as we know, the customer is always right.

In addition, there are now far more universities, many of which are, of course, former polytechnics or colleges. They all give firsts, and it seems likely that some students at venerable institutions who get 2.1s would get a first at one of these newer universities.

When students are in competition for postgraduate grants or plum positions, a first really matters, and so it may seem unfair to disadvantage one's own students when they are in competition with the products of institutions that have, shall we say, a less distinguished academic record.

The government has always been in denial about relative standards (except when it is accusing 'top universities' of not admitting enough working-class students who have been failed by their schools). But, whereas in the 1970s it was possible to claim legitimately that there was a broadly uniform standard that could be maintained across the sector, this is no longer the case.

The external examining system worked across the sector when universities taught a similar range of subjects to students of fairly similar intellectual levels. It still works within self-selected groups of universities. Even Oxford and Cambridge recruit staff from other universities to read their students' essays and exam papers and to assess whether there is consistency of marking of their cohorts' work, while members of their staff act in a similar role at non-Oxbridge universities. It is therefore fair to say that an effective monitoring system is in place within parts of the sector, but not across the sector as a whole.

With 40% of the relevant age group going to university, there is little point in pretending that there is – or can be – some kind of national standard. But for some of our micro-managing politicians, the answer is to have a national agency for monitoring degree standards. We'll be having a national curriculum for universities next. It isn't that universities think they should not be 'accountable'. The problem is an old one: *quis custodiet custodies?* The answer is always the same: academics who have seized the opportunity to go into management (rather than remain mere academics).

I cannot imagine what a national agency for university teaching and learning standards would be like. Well, yes I can – the shortest route to 'dumbing down' university education would be some kind of 'national agency for standards'. There would be universities, science and, of course, 'skills', but not much innovation.

# Taught not to teach

Alex Wood

2011

I started teaching at Craigroyston in Edinburgh in 1973. After 38 years in education, I retired last weekend as a head teacher of Wester Hailes Education Centre.

Teaching has enriched my life beyond anything I might have imagined when I entered it. I have taught thousands of young people and loved the vast bulk of them. I have coaxed the weak and unwilling. Some have not survived. At least three of my former students took their own lives in states of loneliness, fear and desperation. I taught some who fought and suffered in Northern Ireland, in the Falklands, in Iraq, in Afghanistan. I have met others, huddled in blankets, begging on the streets, embarrassed that I've stumbled on their shame. I have known countless young people who have not achieved their potential and have asked what more I might have done to have avoided that. I have also known wonderful youngsters who have left school and entered work, study or stardom and who have looked back with pride and gratitude to their school days.

My career has been spent, almost entirely, in schools serving two of the poorest areas of Edinburgh and in what was euphemistically called 'special' education. I am part of the generation which entered teaching at the time of comprehensivisation. We were ourselves working-class kids, given an opportunity in an age of change. We committed ourselves to creating a fairer education system, one which did not condemn two thirds of youngsters to failure at age 11. We believed that with the right relationships and curriculum and by starting from where our learners were, we could improve learning for everyone, and not merely for a minority.

When we entered teaching, when the baby boom children required a vastly expanded system, when the archaic selective system taught the same curriculum as it had before the First World War, and when the older generation of teachers saw change as chaos, we had to invent a curriculum as we delivered it.

I know that our generation of teachers ejected a few valuable babies with the historic bathwater. Some things we got wrong. (I remain, among other idiosyncrasies, an enthusiast for the teaching of grammar.) Yet we require some reconciliation of the tension between change and continuity, in school terms between developing engaging methods and protecting core content. I've never shied from the seeming contradiction between being a liberal in methods and a conservative in content.

I am proud to have played some part in changing Scottish education. Schools today are overwhelmingly different from those when I was a pupil. As my present career draws to a close, what I value most are the relationships.



On the evening I started to draft this article, I received a message from a recent former student. 'I see the school has changed a lot, everyone is looking much smarter in the uniform. I'd also like to thank you for everything you and the school offered me such as the Columba 1400 experience and visiting South Africa and the numerous other opportunities you gave me. I think if it had not been for me attending Wester Hailes Education Centre things would be a lot different for me, I definitely wouldn't be as confident as I am and it made the move from school to college so much easier.'

I liked what he said but also the fact that he contacted his old head teacher to say it. I certainly had no desire after leaving school in the late 60s to contact my former head. Relationships are warmer and kindlier today. It is accepted by most that no successful learning or teaching can occur if the relationships are fundamentally wrong; yet in schools, as in most institutions, relationships often will go awry but today we seek to mend them.

What I most dislike today are the limitations placed on teachers by a system over-concerned with measurement and protecting backs. I had a photo on my desk of a dozen youngsters in shorts running into a loch. It was 1988, a warm spring evening. We had just arrived at Rowardennan for a residential week. Dinner over, another teacher and I took the kids for a walk. The sun shone. All was well with the world. One youngster had the marvellous idea of a swim. 'Can we just jump in?' My colleague, a PE teacher, knew the youngsters' capacities. We looked at each other and smiled. 'Go on,' we said, and jumped into the loch with them. Our very informal, but professionally informed, risk assessment had taken 10 seconds. We were all out of the freezing water a minute later but what a joy. Today, had I done that I would be on a disciplinary for failing to have completed a formal risk assessment.

And measurement? It measures the measurable – no more. My school was recently inspected. We had been congratulated on the excellent behaviour and relationships but the inspectors could not resist mentioning that our exclusions had increased: not hugely but increased. Statistics, they were what mattered, not the behaviour, not the relationships, but the statistics. We insisted that we excluded only where we had to do so in the best interests of good behaviour and quality relationships. They had observed the behaviour and the relationships but because these things were not measurable they were under-valued.

I also fear the public sector's new managerial culture, concerned with number-crunching, 'impacts' and expressing itself in clichés. There is something seriously wrong when COSLA, the collective body for Scotland's councils, can state that: 'the primary role for a teacher should not be to teach children but should be articulated in terms of ensuring the development, well-being, and safety of children. This is the primary role that teachers should share with other children's services professionals'.

I regret leaving my colleagues to cope with reduced school budgets arising from national economic problems. I regret leaving our students and their community but nothing endures but change and it's my time to change.

# The boy who stopped kicking the boat

Louise Cunningham

2013

'Do you know what that is not?' I asked the bothersome boy, as a jellyfish swam into view. The boy momentarily stopped kicking the boat, and grunted. Then the dull kick, kick, kick started up again.

The boy's response was not much, but the temporary silence brought hope of a quiet journey to all of us on board. The hiatus also had me hoping that my bait was working; the unusual form of my question was luring the irritating boy away from his irksome kicking.

'The jellyfish is not what a starfish is not', I continued, in what I hoped was a mysterious way, but I had hardly finished before the kicking had started up again. I was losing him; the exasperating boy was not as interested in jellyfish and starfish as I had been as a child. I hurried on, hoping to regain even temporary peace, for fear that the boy's boredom would ruin my enjoyment of the day's bird-watching cruise. 'Neither jellyfish nor starfish are fish,' I stated. 'And, despite the lack of shell, squid and octopus are shellfish', I added with aplomb, aware that most of the other passengers were listening in on my unusual choice of conversation.

There may have been fleeting interest, but I didn't stop to give the annoying boy the chance to question the ostensible illogicality of my statements. I wanted to get him well and truly hooked first. Without pausing for breath, I launched into my favourite fascinating fish facts which, in a rare instance of useful preparedness, I had collected in case of crisis. The emergency had come – I urgently needed to instil a sense of amazement in the young boy.

So I spoke of how lungfish can live out of the water for several years, of how mudskipper fish use their fins to walk on land, and of how electric eels have enough electricity to knock a horse over. The boy's kicking was still going, albeit slower and quieter than before, so I challenged myself to one fact for every kick: sailfish can swim as fast as a car on the motorway, whilst flying fish can glide the length of a football pitch and twice the height of a basketball hoop. I moved on to tell of how most fish cannot swim backwards and can drown in water if there's not enough oxygen in it.

In the heat of the moment, my prejudiced view of boys got the better of me and I changed tack, moving onto what I hoped might be more gory facts to better capture his imagination. I explained to the fidgeting boy how the great whale shark can grow to nearly 60 feet and has over 4,000 tiny teeth but will sink if it stops swimming. I recounted what I have heard about piranhas eating human carcasses and the risks Japanese chefs take to prepare puffer fish with its deadly poison. I told of how hagfish can fill a bucket

with slime in one minute and of how many brands of lipstick contain fish scales. My facts were not particularly relevant to the Scottish seas, but they succeeded in capturing the boy's full attention. I threw in a final comment: scientific studies have shown that herring like to fart in company.

With my rapidly dwindling fish fact supply, I was delighted that we had arrived at our destination – the Bass Rock, home to about 60% of Europe's gannets and the largest single island gannet colony in the world. The small steep-sided volcanic island in the Firth of Forth, that was once a prison, is a now magnificent whirlwind of bird activity, which appears white from a distance due to the sheer number, around 150,000, of gannets tightly packed together to breed.

Gannets are, to my mind, one of the most beautiful birds and watching them never fails to excite me. Their spectacular fishing skills have them plunging into the ocean at breakneck speed to catch fish much deeper than most airborne birds. Earlier in the year, they also have a beautifully delicate courtship display, where a pair will face each other and hold their heads skyward, accentuating their beauty and strength as they renew their bond with their partner. Alongside the gannets were razorbills, guillemots, shags, whilst in the water eider ducks and seals were bobbing about around the boat. Even the boy was mesmerised by the sights and smells of the Bass, and his excitement was palpable when he spotted his first clown-like puffin, buzzing about in a ridiculous fashion.

I was simultaneously relieved and delighted; I could watch the spectacle without interruption, and in full knowledge that others were also cast under the magnificent spell. Even when the now interested boy commented on 'seagulls', I managed to restrain myself with a mere mutter under my breath. As any birder will know, the correct name is 'gull' because many of the birds commonly referred to as 'seagulls' reside on land and do not travel to sea for long periods of time. However, the mistake was an entirely forgivable one: it is far more important to be in awe of the splendour of nature than to be able to label it correctly.

I smiled and let the boy's newly found enthusiasm take over. One day, the boy may learn the subtleties of nature's names, but that day had not yet come. That a previously uninterested boy had discovered a wonderful world was more than enough success for one day. I had no desire to recount my remaining fascinating facts for the return journey, and there was no kicking of the boat as we sailed back.

# The obedient robots

Jill Stephenson

2013

What are universities for? Long, long ago their purpose was the higher education of students and the promotion of knowledge through research, with the two linked through the exposure of students to cutting-edge research by its practitioners.

These practitioners were members of academic staff, with a much smaller group of administrative staff to manage the institution. Sometimes there was an uneasy balance, as when a member of staff felt that teaching duties were impeding the progress of his/her research. Or perhaps a class of students felt that they were not getting quite as much of a staff member's time as they needed because s/he was involved in a demanding research project.

Or perhaps a staff member had lost interest in research and busied him/herself with a myriad minutiae of (not always essential) teaching and administrative duties as an alibi for not fulfilling his/her contractual obligations in terms of research. But, for the most part, it worked: students were taught – and did quite a bit of learning independently, which was good for their development – and academics produced the fruits of their research. The purpose of the university was fulfilled.

But then it all changed. What I can only, in a very ugly usage, call the managerialisation of universities from the 1990s created new roles and new problems. Senior members of academic staff had to become 'managers'. The days when a part-time dean of a faculty was able to spend time looking out slides for a 10am lecture were past: deans became full-time managers (and their office was eventually abolished for something more businesslike).

I myself once received a communication which began 'Dear Middle Manager' – not a description of myself that I recognised – inviting me to enrol on a residential training course at another university at a time when I was due to be awash with exam papers to mark. This invitation was intended to enable me to become a 'senior manager'. What it mainly demonstrated was how little the kind of people now running the universities understood the rhythms of the academic year and what had formerly been the priorities of a university: – teaching and research.

Some academics – often those with little interest in research – grasped the managerial opportunities with a shameless alacrity, turning themselves into hierarchically-conscious members of a new – and ever-expanding – elite corps of functionaries. Their attention to managerial detail and their unstinting loyalty to the upper echelons of university management resulted in promotions, sometimes on the Peter Principle. It was often the case that those who could, did. Those who couldn't, taught.

Those who couldn't teach went into management. Those who couldn't even manage were put in charge of spurious indicators of 'excellence' (e.g., the risible National Student Survey). These people adopted the empty language of management and a curled lip, when dealing with mere academics, to accompany it. I remember one such person ostentatiously patronising, with managerial language, a very senior (and much-loved) professor in a meeting, to his complete bemusement. But then he was merely a very distinguished and humane scholar and teacher.

I was only ever on the fringes of 'management', but senior colleagues were whisked away for afternoons or whole days to be 'trained' in the arcane arts of 'management'. Some came back with gleeful tales of how daft it had been while others despaired of its banality. The training courses were mostly run by external consultants who were paid a fat fee for their efforts. Later, a woman was hired on a half-time basis to organise leadership training, 360 degree feedback and all the other things without which the modern university apparently cannot survive.

One external consultant offered an afternoon on 'How does an understanding of brand and positioning aid the process of postgraduate recruitment?' This person was from Stamp Consulting. I was puzzled: stamp collecting I knew about, but stamp consulting? While some layers of management consisted of people who had formerly been full-time academics, new layers – particularly at central level – were formed, usually staffed by people who had a 'business background' and certainly staffed by people who had done some kind of business management course. It quickly became painfully evident that these people had little idea of what the purpose of a university was.

At one meeting that I attended, the 22-year-old (or so it seemed) who was in charge had no conception of what were and what were not cognate academic subjects. But they all exuded an impression of effortless confidence and superiority over bumbling academics who, in their view, knew nothing of the 'real world'. This was the key: the 'real world' of business, PR, income-generation had become the purpose of a university in the 21st century. Talking up the university and its achievements, in the manner of slick salesmen, became *de rigueur* in institutions whose *raison d'être* had formerly been to strip away layers of misinformation in a search for the essential and the authentic.

So a whole layer of 'management' was established where the new language of managers was embedded. I remember being at a meeting about postgraduate recruitment where the person in charge kept talking about 'capturing' things (not potential students). At the centre of all of this was 'HR', human resources, which used to be known as personnel. I am not sure how HR developed such a stranglehold on university structures and staff, but that is what they have done.

I learned from personal experience that the one thing you do not need to have to be in human resources is any kind of empathy with human beings or understanding of what motivates – and what repels – human beings. Three weeks after I retired from 39 years of full-time, continuous employment in my university, I contacted HR (as instructed) about

the process for retaining my office email account, as an honorary fellow. I was told bluntly that they had no records relating to me. HR has decreed that retired members of staff be designated 'visitors', in the face of strictures in a senate ordinance that professors emeriti, at least, should be treated as full members of the university community and not as visitors.

A few years ago, HR at Edinburgh University produced a document called *Developing a Co-ordinated Leadership Framework across the University's managerial grades*. This was because: 'The strong support for a co-ordinated approach to leadership development across the University's senior managerial grades reinforces the need for an OD approach to identifying and delivering business-focussed leadership development'. OD? More like ODD.

It went on: 'A key mechanism which will support the overall leadership framework and its objectives will be a competency framework'. A major clue to the orientation envisaged lay in the perceived need to 'achieve business objectives by motivating and working through staff and colleagues' (including recognising and bringing about behavioural change if required). Ah! Turn them all into obedient robots. No wonder so many of them are now demoralised.

It may be that those who work in business regard all of this as quite normal. Perhaps they even know what it means. Those of us who have spent decades trying to write – and to get our students to write – in clear, readily comprehensible English have difficulty with the jargon involved in all matters managerial. What is a 'competency framework'? Who knows? Who cares?

# What wallowing in history has taught me

R D Kernohan

2013

I always rejoice when someone injects a fresh phrase into the letters to the editors of the more pretentious Scottish papers. I perked up agreeably, though in disagreement, when John Home Robertson scolded those who 'wallow' in history by commemorating Flodden and, presumably, Bannockburn.

For I confess that, in a summer when I had more time for reading than I might have wished, I was wallowing in history. But I think I was wallowing to some purpose, splashing into two truths which escaped me in the distant years when I had an academic interest in history before escaping to journalism and politics. I share them with *SR* readers not out of vanity but because one has a bearing on arguments about Scottish studies in our schools and the other on the growing indifference which our educational system and its clients are often alleged to show towards serious study of foreign languages, modern as well as ancient. (This year has seen a massive fall in higher French in school and another fall in German.)

The first truth is that the supposed neglect of Scottish history in education is a much more complex matter than was suggested when our devolved SNP Administration took credit for demanding more Scottish studies. At first sight, it's hard to deny that this neglect existed. At Glasgow University, where I had an otherwise thorough and demanding grounding in history, I never encountered the professor of Scottish history except in his capacity as a kind of colonel-commandant of the university training corps. I don't think I gave a serious thought after primary school to the Scots wars of independence until the great Balliol English medievalist, Dick Southern, induced me to write an essay on whether Wallace was a freedom fighter or a terrorist (or perhaps both).

But was Scottish history neglected? It wasn't as an integral and important part of British history over many centuries, whether in our glorious failure to impose the Solemn League and Covenant on the rest of the British Isles or our success in building and guiding the British Empire. These British and imperial dimensions are ineradicable and continuing parts of Scottish history which must continue to be emphasised unless Scottish studies are to become SNP briefings. But there is much else in Scottish history that my university generation tended to pass by – not because it was neglected in school but because (like the force-feeding of Sir Walter Scott's novels at too early an age) it may have been mishandled.

I am baffled by those enthusiasts for Scottish studies who argue that they were denied Scottish history in school. All these years later, the chroniclers' exaggerations about Bannockburn – 30,000 Scots thumping 100,000 English – remain graven in my heart. I

do not need to consult Wikipedia to check the name of the unfortunate Sir Henry de Bohun whose head Bruce clove so neatly with an axe. And when I do check, I find that I have also correctly remembered what my textbook taught me about the skin of an unfortunate Hugh de Cressingham being used to make leather souvenirs after the English got tanned at Stirling Bridge. I can also recite from memory the varieties of violent deaths suffered by our medieval Stewart kings.

This was the milk-diet of primary school. Secondary school was more solid but, until quite far on, quite emphatically Scottish and with various unconscious biases – anti-English over the Darien scheme, anti-Highland in its account of the battle of Harlaw (an event given surprising prominence), yet tinged with a *Waverley*-style romanticism over the Jacobites. Was it altogether surprising that some of us, when deciding on a broader and deeper study of history, were tempted to put this kind of Scottish history away among St Paul's category of 'childish things'?

I don't suggest that Scottish history is now only taught in this way, and my fears for it are very different. One is that it may suffer from pressures for a Scottish nationalist interpretation of history; the other that history in general may be denied the place it deserves in the school curriculum and eventually in our universities.

Maybe I worry too much. In time, I have come to delve into aspects of Scottish history which I ignored in a formal historical education – I have even wallowed in the Disruption – and to enjoy the medieval history which I disliked when confronted with compulsory papers. But if a historical education is to serve any purpose in later life it is surely because, in exploring the complexities of some situations and personalities of times past, it equips us with enough scepticism, realism, idealism and anxiety to assess the problems of our own times and worry about those we are leaving behind us. It may not matter what we have studied in detail provided we have studied it deeply enough to develop these qualities.

But that reassuring conclusion confronts me with a another concern and with the perplexing consequences of the second truth about history which I claim to have discovered by having had all too much time to read and reflect last summer. The concern is about the extent to which even good degrees reflect understanding of times past and alien cultures. The 'truth' is that this understanding often demands not only gifts of imagination but supplies of mental equipment enabling us to reach beyond received opinions to original sources, and preferably sources in their original language. That is why my rather abstract concern about a texting generation's capacity to understand people who used long words and joined-up writing may matter less than a practical concern that the possible decline of historical studies may be aggravated by the undoubted decline and neglect of linguistic ones.

My generation was lucky, for the most exciting and attractive development in its time was the British discovery of American history. Many aspects of it seemed more alien than continental European history but it combined the attractions of novelty with access



through the common language. I had the benefit of such scholarly and able enthusiasts as Esmond Wright and Max Beloff but only now do I realise that what enabled many of us to respond to their lead was our ability to go to the sources without loss or distortion in translation. We could discover for ourselves whether Jefferson was just an eloquent charlatan, how Lincoln had greatness thrust upon him, or how nobility, idealism, obstinacy and naivety were mixed in Woodrow Wilson.

Only now do I realise how much more superficial were our interpretations of French or German or Russian history, where we recycled opinions at second hand or, more rarely, rejected some message from history because we resented the messenger. For example, when I dissented from the view of Bismarck handed down by A J P Taylor, it was not because I understood the unexpected complexity of the Iron Chancellor but because I disliked Taylor.

But last summer, when I had enforced leisure to wallow in Bismarck and persevere with the long sentences of German historians of various ideological persuasions, I discovered how little I really grasped in the days when I offered rather glib opinions to examiners. Much of what I found was very different from the allegedly unscrupulous reactionary believer in 'blood and iron'.

Instead, there was a German with a sense of humour and power of wit, whose style was sharper and sentences shorter than those who later wrote about him. A rather conservative traditionalist Christian with an capacity to accept inevitable changes and adapt to them. An enthusiastic anglophile whose low opinion of British politicians went with an eagerness to thrust Shakespearean quotations (and especially parts of *Henry IV*) at his German political opponents – and whose knowledge of British culture extended northwards from the Avon to the banks and braes and braes of bonnie Doon.

One of the minor delights of my tedious summer was settling in my mind that an ironic Bismarckian comment on relations between Prussia and South Germany (in face of Napoleon III) was not, as I at first thought, an allusion to the Scots song *Come Under My Plaidie* but a clear quotation-in-translation from Burns's *O Wert Thou in the Cauld Blast*.

Of course, I don't expect higher history candidates or undergraduate history students to have time to wallow in this way, even if they have some German, or to face up to another of my wearing but revealing summer tasks, the discovery from the memoirs of Simone de Beauvoir just how alien French politics, universities and ways of thought are from British ones. But I worry when I hear of gifted Scottish undergraduates being introduced to Brazilian history without some initiation into Portuguese or being encouraged to pronounce on the Spanish civil war with not the least smattering of the noble language in which its mean and murderous hatreds were expressed.

It's obviously impossible for historians to have even an elementary grasp of all the languages relevant to their fields of study, especially when they can no longer have either a eurocentric or Anglo-American view of the world. In the same way, it's impossible for

Scottish schools to cover, at even a fairly basic level, all the languages that may be useful to our export trade, tourist prospects and cultural exchanges.

But a grasp of even one foreign language, with some ability to trace the ways of thought expressed in it, is not only an asset in itself but a great and sometimes cautionary help in our understanding of the rest of the world. It warns us how much we'd still have to learn about other peoples even if it were true (which it isn't) that 'they all speak English now'.

That's a necessary warning in our contemporary contacts with other peoples, within the European Union as well as far beyond it. It's even more necessary if those who enjoy wallowing in history – in school, university, or even old age – are to get both the full benefit and greatest pleasure from their immersion.

# Is my job a waste of time?

Mirko Canevaro

2014

All I remember about June 2008 is that it was very hot in Italy, and that I spent a lot of time checking my emails. I had been offered a PhD post in classics at Durham and news was overdue about whether I would get a scholarship. As soon as I got the good news, I ran to tell my parents. I still remember the first question they asked me: 'So, what is it that you'll do exactly?'

What I do is research in ancient history – Athens, Sparta, the lot. When academics working in the humanities tell people what they do, the reaction is often incomprehension. 'Don't we know already all we need to about ancient Athens? The Punic Wars? The Glorious Revolution? The Scottish Enlightenment?'

I like explaining what our research is about, showing some ancient inscription that historians had to decipher before Oliver Stone could put that detail in the *Alexander* film, or pointing out that funny mistake made in *300*. People get interested, and they'll talk about the latest book or comic book they've read about Sparta, that TV programme on ancient Persia, that art exhibition they went to. Their questions reflect genuine curiosity.

Not so when the government asks you the same questions. In that case, the questions reflect a prejudice – we're wasting our time and the taxpayers' money. Westminster doesn't seem to have any doubt about this, to such an extent that in 2012 it withdrew all funding for university teaching of the arts and humanities to rUK students. The message was clear: Humanities aren't of any value to society, and if people want to study literature, they'll have to pay for it out of their own pocket. The taxpayers won't subsidise them. Either humanities departments are financially self-sufficient, or they should be shut down. Many colleagues live therefore with a Sword of Damocles above their heads.

Some funding for research in the humanities is still available – after all, I did get the scholarship. For every hundred pounds allocated by the government to Research Councils UK, three pounds go to the arts and humanities. More money is distributed through the Research Excellence Framework. Yet we have to jump through hoops. Notably, we have to demonstrate 'impact' on society and the economy, treacherously defined by HEFCE to exclude students. So if I write a textbook which is read by generations of students, that doesn't count. No impact. What I need is a patent that allows somebody else to make money, or at least an invitation to Melvyn Bragg's *In Our Time* on BBC Radio 4.

Don't get me wrong: few of us like ivory towers. It is doubtful, however, whether such constraints foster good research or even impact itself, and not only in the humanities. Nobel Laureate Peter Higgs has pointed out that in the present funding environment he

would never have managed to conduct his research on the boson, and would probably have been fired. Blue-sky research in the sciences is as damaged by this approach as the humanities.

Nevertheless, a public culture of over-accounting forces us to spend valuable time justifying our existence, fabricating spurious arguments about the 'economic and societal' returns of our last article on female slaves in ancient Sparta. Why? Because, as everyone keeps repeating in newspapers and on TV, the humanities are declining, marginalised by the pressures put on such stuffy topics by the forces of the global market.

Yet this accounting culture apes market forces but doesn't trust them. Because the humanities are not really declining. To give only one example, people choose to spend their free time and their money reading about the past more than they have ever done. Sales for history books have increased between 2002 and 2012 by more than 45%, to almost five and a half million a year. This is twice the growth rate of the publishing industry as a whole. Among these books, even those written for the general public rely on much of our 'worthless' research. Many are written by academics. The 'market' seems to be telling the government to increase public funding for the humanities, not to cut it.

True, in the 1930s, of every two children going to university, one enrolled in a traditional humanities subject. Now just over one in 10 does. But in 1939 there were, in Britain, 50,000 students at 21 universities. Now there are some 2,250,000 students studying at 160 universities. The range of subjects and degrees is incomparable with 1939. Yet, even without taking into account such enormous changes in higher education, if we add to traditional humanities subjects creative arts and design, other allegedly 'useless' degrees, we have two students in 10 deeming it worthwhile to spend years on 'worthless' subjects, and, in England, to spend £9,000 a year for the privilege. What do the other eight do? One is studying social sciences, getting passionate about problems that in the 1930s were mostly within the remit of the humanities.

Of the other seven, four are studying business and administration, the so-called disciplines allied to medicine (mostly nursing), education and law. These are all very respectable degrees, but 40 years ago one didn't need to go to university to practise the relevant professions. Now one does, and needs to pay dearly for it. These four students weren't doing humanities 30 years ago, and they aren't today. Seen in this light, the market for humanities degrees is in fact remarkably resilient, despite all the bad publicity and the continuous governmental and managerial threats.

This attack on the humanities is symptomatic of the UK Government's wider approach to higher education. It's very recent news that the 2012 change in the tuition fees and student loan system, introduced allegedly to afford the government some savings in times of austerity, is backfiring. Forecasts predict a writing-off rate for student loans of 45%, and growing. This means that soon the new system, in addition to costing more to students and their families, and to deterring many from poorer backgrounds from entering higher education, will actually cost the taxpayers more than the previous

one. This is the same reform with which the government cut all funding for the teaching of the humanities to rUK students.

Everybody loses? Perhaps not. In December 2012, a submission by the House of Commons Public Accounts Committee noted that £100m of the public money distributed through student loans went to private institutions, trebled from the previous year and growing. A lot of that money will never be paid back. It fundamentally constitutes public subsidy to private universities, two of which are actually for-profit, awarded university status by this very government. The entire university sector faces unprecedented cuts, funding for the teaching of entire subjects is cancelled, yet the government apparently can find the money to subsidise for-profit institutions, with BPP, a for-profit private university, granted university status in 2013.

David Willetts, the minister who eliminated all Westminster funding for the teaching of the humanities, stated: 'This is an important step towards increasing the diversity of the higher education sector'. A few months later, he commended a recent book for making 'a case for the humanities that avoids the victim complex that is the bane of such discussions'.

Willetts, a history graduate, doesn't like it when we're defensive, because it's against policies like his that we're trying to defend ourselves. I won't speculate here about the reasons for such policies. What I do know is that there's no mandate for them.

The divinity most widely cited by governments – the market – hasn't marginalised classics and history and English, despite the worst propaganda. People buy and read history and philosophy books, and study languages and art at university. But this hasn't stopped our brave leaders: because the real market doesn't support the case against the humanities, they have created a fake one, made of forms and controls and Research Excellence Exercises. In this pretend market, they rig the rules all the time. That's why we are defensive.

# Sleepwalking into an authoritarian Scotland

Kenneth Roy

2014

As the people of Scotland prepare to put a cross in a box to decide their future, the schoolchildren of Dundee will be completing a much more complicated form: a questionnaire of many boxes.

It will take the people of Scotland only a few seconds to make their mark. The assignment facing every child in Dundee between the ages of 9 and 16 is more time-consuming: it will absorb between 30 and 40 minutes of their precious day of education, one of the comparatively few days in the year when they receive any.

Parents in Dundee (as well as Angus and North Ayrshire) are being assured in an official letter that the questionnaire is part of an 'exciting' collaboration – everything has to be exciting these days – between the Scottish Government and 'your local council'. Who could resist such an offer? Who would deny their child a chance of excitement? The Games are over, after all.

If, however, you are one of those pesky people in Dundee who don't approve of your children confiding intimate details of their private lives, it won't be all that simple to opt out. You are obliged to call a freephone number and leave a message. Someone in Devon – for the survey is being conducted by a company in that distant English county – will get back to you.

The letter goes on to explain that the information gathered in the 'ChildrenCount Survey' – note the exciting collaboration between two unrelated words – will be used to enable the authorities, national and local, to better plan public services. Sounds familiar? If you were a regular reader of this magazine last winter, you will remember our long campaign opposing 'Evidence2Success', a questionnaire circulated to children in Perth and Kinross schools in which, notoriously, secondary pupils were asked if they had ever had anal sex.

Just before Christmas, we announced a partial victory in our campaign; or what we thought was a partial victory. We were able to report that the survey would not be rolled out to other local authorities until the Scottish Government's analytical services department approved it. The SNP Administration gave an undertaking that the survey would in future be 'in line with the strong ethical and quality guidelines employed by the Scottish Government in any research it carries out'. Great. (We thought at the time.)

Our only regret was that it had come too late for the parents and children of Perth and Kinross. In view of the intimate nature of many of the questions, inviting disclosure of criminal behaviour and family dysfunction, the remarkable lack of detail in the introductory letter to parents and a rather perfunctory commitment to anonymity, we

took particular exception to the policy of assuming consent from parents and quoted two impeccable sources in our support.

The European Data Protection Directive insists that there must be some active communication between the parties before research work and that organisations 'should not infer consent if an individual does not respond to a communication'. Well, that's clear. It should have been enough to persuade a government which aspires to be 'part of Europe' in an independent Scotland that assuming consent is unacceptable.

The fearless folk down at analytical services, with their rigorous commitment to the highest standards, might additionally have referred to the framework of the Economic and Social Research Council. This states that writing to prospective research participants or their parents notifying them of an intention to include them in research unless they proactively opt-out 'will not normally constitute the giving of informed consent'.

Early in the new year, we were surprised to discover that the Scottish Government, despite its earlier protestations about standards, had somehow managed to convince itself that the European Data Protection Directive and the Economic and Social Research Council were both wrong. We were given sight of a report from analytical services in which the experts declared that they were 'content' with the policy of assumed consent.

Content. What does this mean? It is a handy little word. It often crops up in official documents. It is part of the lexicon of the bureaucrat who, struggling to build anything resembling a case, relapses conveniently into a state of contentment. It excuses any actual justification for a course of action – or, as here, a course of no action.

Analytical services are content. Now go away, why don't you?

We didn't go away. But nor did we say anything. We decided to wait and see what happened next.

Something just has. 'Evidence2Success' – a concept tainted by all the bad publicity, mostly in or inspired by the *Scottish Review* – seems to have disappeared as a brand, but only to be replaced by 'ChildrenCount'. From next Monday, children will be counting all over Dundee and they will go on counting until a few days before the referendum.

This is not some innocuous local initiative. After the pilot in Perth and Kinross, it feels like the next stage in a grand plan: the creation of a massive national database backing up the present administration's intention to have a 'Named Person' for every child in Scotland. The named persons will be public officials. They will assume the role of advisors and guides to our children, though only in office hours and not on bank holidays. The named persons will also require to have what is called 'annual leave'. No doubt, however, the paperwork spewing out of ChildrenCount surveys will be their beach reading.

In this intriguing new Scotland, where European directives are lightly ignored in the interests of contentment, the only people who will be explicitly forbidden from being named persons are the child's own parents.

This is the broader political context for what is happening in Dundee next week. The referendum-voting public, the sort of worrying people who formed the audience at Monday night's televised rabble, ought to be aware of it before they sleepwalk into the authoritarian future that awaits us: a future of databases and named persons – to say nothing of our old friends at Police State Scotland, armed to the teeth, watching over us.

Exciting? That's one way to describe it.



# The Kafkaesque surveillance of our schools

Walter Humes

2014

As Scottish schools re-opened last week after the summer holidays, a rather unusual event took place. Amid the excitement of the start of the new session, a dissident voice was raised. In an article in *The Herald*, a headteacher launched a full frontal attack on what he saw as the oppressive bureaucracy of the Scottish educational system. He questioned whether the experience of most pupils was enjoyable and enriching, and whether it was truly educational, in the sense of providing memorable insights which continued to have value later in life.

Instead, schools had been transformed into 'little more than qualification factories, where learning has become a task to be endured, where the outcome or sole purpose of school is to lead pupils into further or higher education'. Institutions that should 'inspire, motivate, support and encourage' were 'nothing more than workplaces', in which teachers felt compelled to follow increasingly deluded directives from above.

The headteacher went on to list many of the administrative requirements that deflected attention from the real aims of schooling – development plans, whole-school self-evaluations, performance indicators, pupil tracking systems, benchmarking, dimensions of 'excellence', assessment instruments, etc. Much of the information generated by these requirements, he argued, had very limited value – so much so that he intended, in his own school, 'to have a bonfire of the paperwork'.

He directed particular scorn at 'the utter lunacy' of a new system introduced by the General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTCS) designed to ensure that teachers engage in professional learning throughout their careers. It is called 'Professional Update'. This replaces previous – and rather ineffective – earlier systems with labels such as 'in-service training' and 'continuing professional development'.

'Professional Update' has been presented as giving teachers the opportunity to manage their own learning but, as the headteacher notes, they are required to take part in a bureaucratic exercise in which the parameters are very firmly laid down: it involves self-evaluation against professional standards (defined by the GTCS), participation in annual reviews at local level and the production of a portfolio of evidence about how their learning has impacted on practice. In other words, the 'liberation' which teachers are being offered involves compulsory jumping through a series of prescribed hoops.

By this point, readers may be wondering who this brave, or foolhardy, headteacher is. This is where the story becomes particularly interesting and casts doubt on some of the cherished myths of the 'democratic tradition' in Scottish education. The critic is not a headteacher within the state system but Rod Grant, head of Clifton Hall, an independent

school near Edinburgh. So strongly does he feel about the issues he raises that he has decided to cancel his registration with the GTCS – a gesture that is not open to teachers in state schools, since in their case GTCS registration is a condition of employment by local authorities.

Can we expect a few heads within the state sector to follow Mr Grant's lead and refuse to respond to all the calls for documentation? This is highly unlikely since a pattern of conformity is deeply ingrained within the public system. Headteachers in state schools are expected to show corporate allegiance in following the instructions of local authorities. They are told in no uncertain terms that they have a line-management relationship with local authority officials and, if they were to air dissent in public, they would be liable to find themselves subject to disciplinary proceedings. It is made clear that their first loyalty is not to their staff, the pupils, their parents or the community, but to the local authority, whose organisational 'integrity' must be maintained at all costs.

In private, many headteachers express despair at the constraints and frustrations of their position but they are understandably reluctant to take the risk of speaking out. This perhaps explains why it has become quite difficult to attract good candidates for some headteacher posts. The job carries great responsibility and high visibility, but limited power. Is it any wonder that many experienced, successful teachers decide that further promotion is not worth the stress that would accompany a post as headteacher?

Following Mr Grant's article, there were some interesting reactions. Kenneth Muir, the chief executive of the GTCS, emphasised that 'the broad church of Scottish education' had been involved in the development of the 'Professional Update' process – a familiar appeal to the twin notions of 'consultation' and 'consensus' which feature regularly in official accounts of the development of Scottish educational policy. He hoped that Mr Grant would re-consider his decision to de-register.

However, online discussion revealed strong support for Mr Grant and a distinct lack of sympathy for the GTCS's position, including some comments from teachers who clearly worked in the state sector. One referred to the GTCS as 'a self-serving political vehicle' and argued that it is 'an organisation that requires shaking up as the same old faces move from quango to quango to buttress their previous work elsewhere'.

There is certainly a perception in some quarters that the GTCS is an organisation with territorial ambitions, seeking to colonise new areas of operation. It was granted increased powers in 2013 and is viewed favourably by government, partly because it costs the public purse nothing – its income is derived from the registration fees of teachers – and partly because its desire for professional 'respectability' means that it can be relied upon never to offer a serious challenge to official policy.

Few people would dispute the notion that teachers, like other professionals, need to keep on learning beyond their initial training and be open to new ideas and approaches. It is doubtful, however, if this can be assured by the imposition of a system that purports to be liberating but which is, in fact, highly directive. As Gordon Kirk, a former principal

of Moray House College of Education, wrote some years ago: 'Perhaps the hallmark of the professional teacher is that he or she holds open the possibility of enhanced performance, not as a response to political diktat, not as a form of compliance, not in fulfilment of contractual requirement, but as an expression of an inner professional commitment to improved practice'.

It would appear that this eminently sensible perspective has been rejected in favour of Kafkaesque surveillance.

# One Scot's journey of disillusionment

Walter Humes

2014

Towards the end of his life, the radical Scottish educationist R F Mackenzie (1910-87) expressed disenchantment with all the major institutions which, as a child, he had been brought up to respect – the church, the law, the educational and political systems.

He referred to them as 'priesthoods', each of which promised much but failed to live up to the ideals they claimed to represent. I suspect that his journey of progressive disillusionment is one that is experienced by many people as they observe the gap between the public rhetoric of major institutions and the protectionism and self-interest that often drives their policies and practices.

Mackenzie was brought up in a God-fearing household, which is reflected in the formidable knowledge of the Bible, evident throughout his writings. His father was a stationmaster in rural Aberdeenshire and the religious atmosphere of the home was balanced by encouragement to work things out from first principles and think independently.

Young Mackenzie gradually formed the view that throughout history religion had been used to justify and sustain social divisions and differential power, a function obscured by mystical language and traditional respect for the arcane knowledge of ministers and priests. He did not deny that many individual Christians lived good lives and tried to create a better world, but the institutional face of religion encouraged unquestioning compliance among adherents. Eventually, he found it impossible to reconcile his inmost thoughts and feelings with the prevailing doctrines: escape from what he came to think of as a form of indoctrination was a liberating experience.

A similar journey can be seen in the evolution of his educational beliefs. Unlike most other progressive educators, such as A S Neill (1883-1973), Mackenzie spent his career working within the state system. He was clearly a competent teacher and was appointed to two headships, first in Fife and then in Aberdeen. But his unconventional thinking about the aims of education meant that he encountered problems with officialdom and the more conservative elements within the teaching profession. His enlightened views on the curriculum, on discipline and punishment, and on the value of learning outside the classroom, meant that he often had to defend his actions against critics who found his approach threatening.

In his *Manifesto for the Educational Revolution*, which only became available after his death, he questioned whether formal education really offered the personal development it promised. Certainly for 'non-academic' pupils it was often a deeply oppressive experience, labelling them failures at an early age: his account was borne out by a

brilliant research study by Lesley Gow and Andrew McPherson entitled *Tell Them from Me* (1980). And even for those who were successful and gained the exam passes that secured entry to university, their progress through the system could be seen as initiation into conformity, a poor substitute for what Mackenzie would regard as a true learning experience.

He wanted schools to become genuinely democratic institutions, rather than the prisons and factories which they were to the less successful. For him, they were agencies merchandising a commodity that was fundamentally anti-educational – namely authority.

Mackenzie had less to say about the law than the other 'priesthoods' but it is not difficult to work out his position. Most people would certainly prefer to live in a society where there is a well-established legal framework than one where anarchy prevails. But easy invocations of 'the rule of law' as a key feature of democracy need to be scrutinised. That is all very well if the laws are perceived to be fair and just, but what if they are not?

History shows that protest, civil disobedience and a willingness to break laws that are considered oppressive has been essential in the struggles of workers, women and various minorities. Unqualified acceptance of 'the rule of law' may be attractive to those who govern: from the perspective of the governed, there may be occasions when resistance can be justified.

Lest this seems to apply only to the past, let me give a fairly recent example. When the toll charge for the Skye Bridge was introduced, it provoked strong protests and many islanders refused to pay. They were taken to court and fined and, in a move that gives meaning to the phrase 'the law is an ass', the cases were held in Dingwall on the mainland – which required the accused to commit two more offences, by crossing and re-crossing the bridge. The strength of the campaign, along with public dismay at the branding of protestors as criminals, ensured that the cause received plenty of media attention.

I recently heard an interesting account of the campaign by Andy Anderson, one of the protestors, including his short spell in Inverness jail. The public embarrassment to the government finally led to the abolition of the toll charge in 2004, but not before several uncomfortable revelations emerged about the Public Finance Initiative (PFI) which had funded the project in the first place. Thus the protestors not only benefited the islanders: they also contributed to public awareness that was useful in relation to future PFI (later PPP) projects.

Political radicalism is often seen as a characteristic of the young, with many people becoming more moderate as they get older. This was not the pattern followed by Mackenzie. His wife remarked that: 'He got more and more radical the older he got'. His politics were undoubtedly of the left but he was dismayed to observe the assimilation of Labour politicians into the rituals and traditions of the establishment, their acceptance of existing power structures and their pursuit of status and rewards.

It is easy to imagine how contemptuous he would have been of Tony Blair and New

Labour. The figures who met with his approval were early socialists, such as Keir Hardy and John Maclean. He would undoubtedly have been fascinated by recent developments in Scotland, but his approval of the growing confidence of Scots in relation to culture and identity might have been tempered by concern about evidence of growing centralisation and the drift towards authoritarianism – represented, for example, by the establishment of Police (State) Scotland.

Mackenzie's finest book is *A Search for Scotland*, published in 1989 after his death. It reveals a profound knowledge of the geographical and historical character of Scotland, as well as serious reflections on the cultural condition of the country. In a foreword to the book, the historian T C Smout observes: 'His rage is at the inhumanity of forms of human authority – the family authority, academic authority, bureaucratic authority'.

I often wonder what Mackenzie would make of post-devolution, and perhaps pre-independence, Scotland. His deep love of his native country – its people, its landscape, its heritage – would probably incline him towards romantic nationalism. But would he be any happier with the performance of those institutions – the church, the law, the educational and political systems – which he came to regard as falling far short of the claims that they make about their values and achievements? I rather doubt it.

# Class distinctions

Dominic Brown

2016

I'd like to address the appeal by the Archbishop of Glasgow, Philip Tartaglia, to Catholic teachers who are not working in Catholic schools. The Archbishop has requested them to 'please seek an appointment in a Catholic school'.

Now, my daughter attends a non-segregated primary school. Several of her teachers have been Catholics and are therefore clearly among Archbishop Tartaglia's target group. What he proposes is that such teachers leave my daughter's school, and go to work in the publicly-funded segregated sector. The effect on my daughter and her classmates doesn't appear to figure in Tartaglia's calculations; his only concern, of course, is RC schools. Non-segregated schools can lose teachers (indeed, this is what the clergyman hopes will happen, despite the euphemistic and disingenuous framing of his appeal to 'Catholic teachers not working in Catholic schools'). Despite the damage to the children in non-segregated schools, their parents would still be legally compelled to pay towards the schools which enticed their children's teachers away.

In other words, children at Catholic schools have more right to the teachers.

Central to Tartaglia's plea is the fact that there are insufficient numbers of RC teachers. The causes of this are worth analysing. Of course there are exceptions, but in our day 'Catholic' has increasingly come to mean someone who attended a segregated Catholic school. From my front window, I see significant numbers of children heading to the local Catholic primary each weekday; few, if any, attend mass in the church across the road on Sundays. At baptisms, weddings and funerals, you can't help noticing how rare are the 'Catholics' who actually know the responses, or the words of the hymns. Few appear to consider themselves bound by teaching on pre-marital living arrangements, or on contraception.

As the Catholic Archbishop of Dublin, Diarmuid Martin, commented after the overwhelming Yes vote in the recent Irish referendum on same-sex marriage, most of the Yes voters went to RC schools, and his church 'needs a reality check'. Yes, in the privacy of the voting booth, just like the privacy of the bedroom, few 'Catholics' accept the church's teachings.

In short, to be told that someone calls themselves a Catholic tells you very little about their system of values.

The church knows this; it's one of the main reasons why it is so opposed to giving up its schools. The rise of English as a world language can be traced in the increasing prevalence of non-native speaker accents among Scotland's priests, while Scottish boys' interest in the priesthood has all but dried up. The one thing connecting children today

with the church is segregated schools. To take them away would be to marginalise (even neutralise) the influence of the Catholic clergy.

Paradoxically, perhaps, those of us opposed to these schools might find it easier to convince the segregationists if the church was arguing from a position of strength, rather than weakness; if most 'Catholics' actually lived according to the church's teaching, said church would have less to lose by allowing children to be educated together.

The traditional claim that RC schools are open to all children (and hence are non-sectarian) has been undermined by reports that several councils want to reserve places at denominational schools for Catholics. Why not just build more Catholic schools, or enlarge the ones that already exist? Well, because they can't get the teachers. If the schools really were successful at inculcating Catholic values, there would be no difficulty in finding true believers to work as teachers. But most kids at Catholic schools are no more interested than their parents in these values. They're living in a place and time where the politics of identity trump just about everything else, and they're not going to abandon entirely their community's historic distinctiveness (which isn't necessarily the same thing as believing in transubstantiation). If we can't get more teachers, the logic goes (and we can't, because so many of them are living with their boyfriends or girlfriends, and/or never go to mass) then we'll have to restrict entry.

There were very good historical reasons for RC schools. But it needs to be asked if the schools have overcome the anti-Catholic discrimination that made segregation necessary. If the answer is no, then segregation has proved unsuccessful in righting the wrong, so what is the justification for continuing it? If the answer is yes, if effective discrimination has been marginalised, then there's no continuing justification for segregated education. And, in fact, Scotland's Catholics, according to Professor Tom Devine, achieved occupational parity in the 1990s. So, if I understand correctly, the argument goes 'we needed to segregate children 100 years ago to solve certain problems. These problems have now been solved. Therefore, we still need to segregate children'.

No-one doubts that much of what happens in RC schools is good, wholesome, and beneficial to the children, but the same claim could be made for fee-charging private schools. A country's education system cannot be evaluated solely by what happens inside one (segregated) type of school; an educational system has wider societal effects.

Taxpayer-funded segregation will not end this year, or next. However, certain observations can be made. Firstly, it can be predicted that the word 'predictable' will be used in eloquent deconstruction of the arguments advanced here. Secondly, the segregated workplaces of our grandfathers' day will be compared negatively with segregated classrooms today. Thirdly, the declining numbers of authentically practising Catholics will articulate arguments in which they mistakenly assume themselves to be representative of the parents at their children's schools.

In regard to the longer-term, however, the church's desperation is apparent, its selfishness and arrogance exemplified in Archbishop Tartaglia's attempt to poach



teachers from non-segregated schools. We'd be a lot more likely to respect each other's right to hold different beliefs if Archbishop Tartaglia didn't try to undermine our kids' education.

Is there such a thing as society, Your Grace? Clearly you don't think so.

# Silence of the sheep

Jean Barr

2016

The SNP's policy of free university tuition has so powerfully framed the debate on education in Scotland that it has effectively screened out other concerns, such as the impact on schools, on lifelong and further education and on poor students. The better-off are the unacknowledged beneficiaries of the way student support policy has been debated, described and formulated. Scottish education policy now seems to operate within an affirmative culture that places itself beyond criticism and other options beyond debate.

In 2001, the Labour-led Government in Edinburgh removed upfront fees for Scottish university students, replacing them with a one-off graduate endowment of £2,000 (£2,700 at today's prices) to be paid after graduation. The Graduate Endowment and Student Support (Scotland) Act of 2001 defines the graduate endowment as 'a fixed amount that some graduates will be liable to pay, after they have completed their degree', adding that the funds raised are to be used to 'provide student support, including bursaries, for future generations of disadvantaged students'.

The expectation was that as many as 50% of graduates, including mature students and some disabled students, could be exempt from paying the endowment. It is worth pausing here to underline the fact that it was not the SNP who abolished upfront tuition fees but the first Scottish Executive, a coalition between Labour and Liberal Democrats. What the minority SNP Administration abolished in 2008 was the graduate endowment scheme.

The SNP has been in power now for nearly a decade – since 2007 as a minority government and since 2011 as a majority government. In 2013, as a result of the rising costs of its university fees policy, it cut maintenance grants for the poorest by 40%, without any parliamentary scrutiny. Grants had already been cut in real terms since 2007 when the SNP came to power. They have now been cut in half. Young students from families earning less than around £30,000 have lost out because grant cuts have more than outweighed any benefit to them from the abolition of the graduate endowment scheme.

Lucy Hunter Blackburn, the former civil servant responsible for implementing the graduate endowment scheme, points to mounting evidence that free university tuition represents a middle-class hand-out by stealth: 'It's superficially universal, but in fact it benefits the better off most and is funded by pushing the poorest students further and further into debt'. Some of this evidence can be found in *Higher Education in Scotland and the UK* (2015), a study of higher education policy across the UK. In the final chapter

of the book, Professor Sheila Riddell of the University of Edinburgh's Moray House School of Education concludes that free university tuition in Scotland hasn't produced the egalitarian, progressive outcomes claimed for it.

A recent critical analysis in the *New Statesman* is blunt in spelling out the implications of such research. As a result of prioritising universal free university tuition over targeted grants, says Tim Wigmore, the worst place for poor students in the UK is Scotland. Students here now leave university with an average debt of £21,000, more than in Wales and Northern Ireland, which have tuition fees. When less generous spending on bursaries by Scottish universities is taken into account (English institutions spend more than three times as much on bursaries, because of their student fee income), many disadvantaged Scottish students will graduate with higher debt than equivalent students in England.

Scotland now has the lowest number of school leavers from the poorest fifth going to university in the UK. In England, the figure is 17%, in Wales 15.5%, in Scotland, just 9.7%. Free university tuition seems to have blinded government and wider public to the broader picture. Working-class students traditionally use Further Education (FE) colleges, sometimes as a route via HNC and HND to university. Cuts to the FE sector have undermined what was already a poor cousin in our education system. The number of FE colleges in Scotland has almost halved, from 37 in 2011-12 to 20 in 2014-15, partly because of Michael Russell's enthusiasm for amalgamations.

More importantly, between 2007 and 2014-5, the number of college places fell by 156,000, from 379,233 to 222,919. Worryingly, 35% of FE students from the most deprived backgrounds don't complete their courses. Retention rates on longer courses have worsened and female enrolments have fallen. In 2014-5 colleges received £114m for student bursaries. That budget goes down to £107m this year, forcing students into yet more debt. Patrick Harvie, leader of the Scottish Green party, voices regret about this in his blog but believes that once Scotland can set its own welfare policies, a longer-term option would be a citizen's income. Well, perhaps, but the maintenance grant system is the only welfare policy that the Scottish Government directly controls now and so is a reasonable indicator of where its political priorities lie.

The Scottish Funding Council (SFC) says the decline in numbers is a result of colleges being asked to prioritise more 'substantive courses' by the Scottish Government and to reduce the number of learners enrolled on leisure programmes and short courses. The EIS says that the decision to prioritise full-time courses for younger learners, coupled with the change in government priorities, has a knock-on effect on part-time courses that often attract adults, carers, disabled learners and others. It has weakened the lifelong learning elements that have been a long-standing, if small, aspect of Scottish FE provision.

A 'substantive course' is geared towards accredited qualifications and requires a significant amount of study time. A major chunk of lifelong learning used to be called

'second chance education', that is, adult education designed specifically for those who didn't do well at school. They may be daunted by formal education and need step-by-step commitments or have little time because of caring or other work commitments. Many participants are women who weren't served well by school in the past. The kind of flexible learning opportunities that are likely to suit them are now regarded as 'not substantive': the fall in female enrolments is evidence of that.

In a climate where local authority funding for adult and community education has all but dried up and key adult education providers such as the Workers Educational Association (WEA) and university continuing education departments struggle to stay afloat, the Scottish Government has received surprisingly little flack for this casual dismissal. Yet cuts in student grants and reducing FE student places are not the unavoidable results of budget cuts in the form of the Scottish block grant from Westminster. The Scottish Government has choices. The most significant choice so far has been the decision to fund a freeze in council tax at a cost of £560m this year and £630m next year. This is a lot of money not available for FE colleges or student grants (or schools or hospitals) and again it is a freeze that benefits the better-off most. This is a political choice, concerning what to prioritise.

An option that was not available in 2013, when maintenance grants were so drastically cut, will become available in 2016-7, namely to use the new income tax-raising powers long sought by the SNP. The Scottish Rate of Income Tax (SRIT) is a progressive tax that hits harder as income rises because there is a tax-free personal allowance. However, everyone earning above the personal allowance would still have to pay more tax. This is ostensibly why the SNP rejects it because they argue against any tax increase for workers who are relatively low paid. The Scottish Labour Party's election manifesto's proposal to increase SRIT by 1p and to make a £100 payment to any taxpayer earning less than £20,000 is an attempt to compensate households at the bottom and mitigate the effects of the tax increase for a large number of households in the middle- and upper-middle income range.

The Scottish Government has had almost a decade in power with no change. The new Scotland Bill will give it nearly full control over income tax bands and rates. It will also devolve a £2.5bn welfare budget to Holyrood. At such a pivotal moment, there is an urgent need for a wider debate about priorities.

In the lead up to the election in May, and as local councils face cuts of £350m this year and £500m next year, Nicola Sturgeon has just announced a 'radical reform' of local government finance. Besides a 'more progressive council tax' (a tiny adjustment to the top bands) there is the proposal that if councils boost economic growth and income tax receipts, they'll share in the benefit. It is clear that any such plan will take several years to implement – too late to protect local services from the savage cuts to council budgets this year. The tweak in council tax bands E-H will raise just £100m in 2017-8, when it comes into force.

Why hasn't there been deeper questioning of the SNP's policy record? The Scottish Government portrays opposition as being 'against Scotland' because the SNP claims to speak for Scotland. Opposition is weak, not just in the Labour Party but in the wider polis. Few think tanks are providing sources of criticism and new policy ideas, and the institutions that make up the weft of Scottish civil society such as trade unions, churches, professional associations, educational bodies, voluntary organisations and businesses, with few exceptions, seem lacking in the will to speak up.

The institutions of Scottish civil society were once pivotal in preserving the Scottish nation within the union. They now fail to hold their government to account. Close-knit institutional connections and strong social, cultural and intellectual cohesiveness distinguished the 18th-century Scottish Enlightenment from the Enlightenment in England, which was a looser, more demotic affair. The Scottish men of letters were involved in a project to improve the Scottish nation within the new union and to demonstrate its distinctive worth in relation to its newish, bigger sibling.

This close-knit nature of civil society may now be acting as a brake on innovative thinking, the disputatious civility of social life giving way to near silence. Size matters. Scotland is tiny. Typically, everyone involved in any policy area knows everybody else. Are people scared of the consequences of criticising the SNP? Are they worried about deepening the divide that exists in Scotland since the referendum, despite talk of the 'festival of democracy' that is supposed to have taken place during the summer and autumn of 2014?

Recent research on medical students in the UK should give everyone pause for thought. A study of 33,000 applications to 22 medical schools across the UK found that a disproportionate number of medical students come from the most affluent homes. So far, so unsurprising. The sting in the tail is in the differences between the nations of the UK. In England, 8.7% of medical students were from the poorest 20% of the population by postcode, against 4.3% in Scotland. In Scotland, where private schooling is far more prevalent in some areas, particularly Edinburgh, 35% of medical students came from fee-paying schools, as against a UK average of 27%. This is an uncomfortable finding for anyone who believes in Scotland's special concern for social justice, particularly in education.

A recent survey indicates that there will be a landslide victory for the SNP in May this year despite only modest satisfaction with its performance in government. Only a third of voters believe that they have done well in four key policy areas. It seems that no matter what they do in the time left between now and May, the SNP is 100% sure to win. Scotland will soon be the most powerful devolved country in the world. There is now a need for a creatively critical and open discussion that can hold government to account.

# Parent licensing

Alison Preuss

2016

If the road to hell is paved with good intentions, the Scottish Government's named person scheme, due to be steamrollered out in August, is set to add a whole new layer of tarmac to the national re-surfacing project known as GIRFEC (Getting It Right For Every Child).

For families who prefer byways to highways, the designated path to Getting It Righteousness – under the supervision of a state-appointed minder – feels more like a forced march to the communal midden. Although the Scottish Government and its paid cheerleaders like to claim the controversial policy is simply about providing a single point of contact for families, the legislation paints a very different picture. Confidential information can now be shared, and interventions triggered, whenever a teacher or health visitor considers a child to be at risk of not meeting the government's desired well-being outcomes. In other words, it represents a seismic shift from the established threshold – risk of significant harm – at which the state may interfere in private family life.

Unlike welfare, well-being has no precise legal definition and is to be arbitrarily measured against a checklist of more than 200 risk indicators. The pass mark for individual parents will largely depend on the appointed box-ticker's interpretation of life events, significant or otherwise, such as losing the pet hamster.

The scheme is underpinned by the government's unhealthy obsession with Getting Information Recorded For Every Citizen, since we just can't be trusted to do the right thing by ourselves. No matter what the problem – even if it there isn't a problem, but there just might be in the future – the preferred solution is invariably to collect and crunch more of our data. Acquiring a single view of each and every citizen, they contend, will not only help identify those in need support, but also flag up any outliers for remediation.

The flaws in the argument are obvious to anyone who is concerned about the relationship between citizen and state. What has been legislated for in Scotland is a mass surveillance system, starting with the children, while simultaneously gathering details of every other family member and associated adult from myriad sources, mostly without their consent or even knowledge.

When it comes to human rights and data protection, Scotland declared UDI long ago, and Getting It Right training for the past several years has underlined the new 'just do it' approach to information sharing. Never mind the duty of confidentiality, just grab the data – oh, and don't tell the lab rats as they might think they have a choice. It's easy to see

how minority groups will be deemed disproportionately dodgy by the new algorithm when 'capacity to provide well-being' is subjectively assessed in terms of the government's preferred outcomes for children.

At a recent event, one home-educating father of five realised he was in trouble after perusing the extensive list of risk indicators. His children, including two under-fives, were all born at home, the family don't vaccinate, they are vegetarian, and he was brought up in care. He wondered if getting a telly might improve their family's score as the health visitor was becoming more persistent than a double glazing salesman.

Forget the good intentions, the named person scheme is paving the way to parent licensing in Scotland. Too many penalty points and you'll be sent on a well-behaving course to learn the error of your child-rearing ways, so try not to get caught too often speeding through Asda with a trolley full of ready meals. Under the totting up procedure you could lose your licence, and maybe even your kids.

# Dead end kids?

Kenneth Roy

2016

## 1.

The Scottish Government has what it calls a 'vision' for the education of our children. Word for word, this is it: 'Scotland should be the best place to learn. We want each child to enjoy an education that encourages them to be the most successful they can be and provides them with a full passport to future opportunity'.

As a piece of prose, it is clumsy; as a statement of intent, vacuous. Let me count the ways.

*The best place to learn.* The best in the UK, the best in Europe, the best in the world? Or just the best in Auchenshuggle? And *best* in what way? Does anyone in the Scottish Government have the least idea what is meant by this fatuous aspiration?

Grammatically, too, there are problems. The sloppy clash between singular (*each child*) and plural (the ugly repetition of *them* as well as the appearance of *they*) could have been avoided with the use of the word children rather than *each child* at the start. If you want to instruct others in literacy, mind your own.

The authors of the vision want children to be *the most successful they can be*. How do they measure success? Why, anyway, is the achievement of success, with its connotations of wordly advancement, judged to be the purpose of education?

Thirty words in, the vision collapses under the weight of its own platitudes with a *full passport to future opportunity*. What are we to do with a half passport? Could there be a passport to *past* opportunity? And what is the nature of this *opportunity*? An opportunity to be or do what, exactly?

One supposes that a committee of reasonably bright people composed this meaningless guff and may have spent many hours poring over draft after draft of it. The result – the vision – has only one merit. It informs us that the Scottish Government has no vision.

In February 2015, Nicola Sturgeon launched the Scottish Attainment Challenge with the aim of 'achieving equity in educational outcomes'. In plain language – the sort that Scotland's policy writers try to avoid – this is an attempt to narrow the widening gap in exam results between under-performing schools in poor areas and high-achieving schools in more prosperous ones. In August of that year, the First Minister made 'a key note [sic] speech on the first day of the new school term' (I'm quoting from the SG press release) in which she said that 'Scotland must deliver a world-class education system for every child in the country, where what matters will be what works'.

*What matters will be what works* is another masterpiece of official obfuscation. It



could mean just about anything. The grandiloquent ambition that Scotland will be the *best* place to learn seems to have been abandoned; it is now enough that it should be *world-class*. Note, however, that the Scotland of Ms Sturgeon's dreams should not only *deliver* (favourite word of the bureaucrat) this world-class education; it must do so in the form of a *system*. The use of that dead word – together with the belief that *what matters will be what works* – points to an underlying assumption that Scottish education is a utilitarian process serving such unreliable gods as *success* and *opportunity*. It would be helpful if this were frankly acknowledged. We could then dispose of any remaining illusion that school might be a place of restless intellectual curiosity, where everything is questioned.

Instead, in pursuit of the utilitarian objective, we have the Scottish Attainment Challenge – a piece of feeble gesture politics wrapped up in a fancy title, which seems to involve the hiring of a few more specialist teachers in deprived areas. The Cabinet Secretary for Education, John Swinney, announced in June that this mysterious scheme was being extended from primary schools to 133 secondaries 'across Scotland'. The press release declared that 'more than £20m will be allocated to challenge authorities during the second year of the initiative'. It is unclear whether the Scottish Government is issuing a challenge to local authorities or whether there is a new breed of council known as a challenge authority. The language is as impenetrable as ever.

But if the Scottish Government is not outstandingly literate, it is approximately numerate. It has been able to count to 20. Mr Swinney seemed to regard this petty cash as worth shouting about. How far does he expect it to go in closing the notorious attainment gap?

## 2.

How far would it go in Easterhouse alone? If you threw every penny of the £20m at this Glasgow estate, and gave nothing to the rest of Scotland, would anyone notice the difference?

The secondary school in Easterhouse is called Lochend Community High School. This year, in the annual measurement of Highers results, it ranked lowest of all the city's schools. Education Scotland predicted that 23% of those sitting the exam at Lochend would gain three or more Highers; in the event, only 9% did so. Seven miles away, in prosperous Newton Mearns, 84% of senior pupils in the state secondary – Mearns Castle – achieved three or more Highers. This is the attainment gap at its most extreme.

For a clearer understanding of why it exists, or why politicians think it exists, the experts invite us to consider the socio-economic profile of places like Easterhouse. The figures are certainly impressive. Only 52% of the population have a job; a third are claiming out of work benefits; 27% are 'limited' by disability of some kind; less than a third own their own homes; more than half belong to social class D or E; four out of every 10 adults are cohabiting; more than half of the households are single parent; four

out of every 10 children are officially classified as living in poverty. If you are a man in Easterhouse you can expect to die at 69; just down the road, your counterpart in Newton Mearns is still above ground at nearly 80. Such stark contrasts are said to establish a clear link between poverty and relatively low academic achievement.

But it may not be as simple as that; it rarely is. There is, for example, a baffling disconnection between the general perception of schools in areas of multiple deprivation and the upbeat tone of the last inspection report on Lochend Community High School by Education Scotland. The inspector praised the 'key strengths' of the school: 'friendly, polite young people who contribute well to the school and the community'; 'senior students achieving well in a broad range of settings'. There was scarcely a word of criticism and none of rebuke. How does one square this glowing testimony with the school's position at the bottom of the Glasgow heap? The beacon of enlightenment described in the report reads like a different school.

Perhaps the inspector lowered her expectations to reflect the nature of the community. It does seem to be how Education Scotland operates. In arriving at the benchmark for each school's Highers results, it estimates (by a method known as the virtual comparator) how the school should be performing against the socio-economic background of its pupils. If the young people of Easterhouse knew they were being judged in this way, by a government which claims to be dedicated to the eradication of social inequality yet chooses to entrench it in the presentation of results, they would be entitled to feel humiliated. But no-one seems to want to know what the young people of Easterhouse – the consumers of the product – think about this or anything else; it seems no-one has thought to ask them.

There is, however, another possibility: that the inspection report for Lochend Community High School was an honest appraisal of the school's qualities. In that case, the policy decisions being driven by examination results look more grossly simplistic than ever. Here is a subversive alternative that might be worth considering: relatively free of parental and peer pressure, the pupils of Easterhouse, unlike the conventional achievers of Newton Mearns, may have rejected the competitive ethos of formal education – its 'intense individualism' as R F Mackenzie once nicely put it – and concluded that Ms Sturgeon's obsession with testing and performance is not for them. Maybe, unobserved, they have been delivering a damning verdict on a colossal national failure to retain their interest.

I wouldn't blame them. Look what three-plus Highers passes and a university degree have done for the authors of the Scottish Government's vision for education. In adult life they were prepared without shame to commit to paper the words a *full passport to future opportunity*.

# Declining standards in education

Walter Humes

2016

The First Minister's aspiration to create a 'world leading' educational system suffered a severe setback this week when the latest results from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) were published. Scotland has slipped down the rankings compared with its position in the previous PISA study in 2012.

In the earlier survey, the country was rated above average in reading and science, and average in maths. The latest figures put Scotland as average in all three subjects. Within the UK, England and Northern Ireland both achieved better results than Scotland. Sir Michael Wilshaw, outgoing head of Ofsted in England, said: 'Scotland used to be a beacon of excellence – it's not any more'. The top-performing countries overall were Singapore, Japan, Canada, Finland and Estonia.

All such surveys should be treated with some caution. Much depends on the details of the methodology, the way in which data are collected and interpreted. Moreover, an educational system should not be judged solely on results in formal assessments. But the PISA study involved 540,000 15-year-old students across 72 countries so its findings cannot be dismissed. And although Scotland still performs comparatively well in global terms, it is the direction of travel that is worrying: the pattern of relative decline has been apparent since 2000. Of particular concern is the fact that Scotland has low numbers of very high-attaining pupils. In science, for example, fewer than 8% of Scottish pupils perform at the highest levels: in Singapore it is 24%.

Critics have been quick to offer a number of explanations. For the teachers' unions, the main cause has been the financial squeeze on resources, with councils having to reduce the number of teachers and support staff. Others have blamed the flagship policy of Curriculum for Excellence, first planned in 2004 and introduced in 2010. The management of the programme has been fraught with difficulties. Teachers have complained that they have deluged with unhelpful 'guidance' and required to complete an excessive amount of paperwork. Only recently has there been an attempt to free them from some of these burdens.

There are grounds for thinking that the causes are rather more deep-rooted. The SNP Government has arrogantly dismissed concerns that have been coming from a number of sources for several years. Professor Lindsay Paterson of Edinburgh University has been a persistent critic of Curriculum for Excellence, arguing that its emphasis on vague 'life-skills' at the expense of knowledge has led to a dumbing-down of intellectual demands. The education committee of the Royal Society of Edinburgh has made reasoned responses to many of the changes: these appear to have had little impact on official

thinking. Reform Scotland, an independent think tank, has put forward various suggestions for improving provision. These, too, have been largely ignored.

Instead of listening to the critics, the government pressed ahead with its plans. It adopted a very directive role in relation to Education Scotland and the Scottish Qualifications Authority, the national agencies charged with introducing the new curriculum and associated assessment system. These bodies have come in for a fair amount of criticism, some of it certainly justified, but the evidence suggests that they have been subject to strong central direction from Scottish Government ministers and officials. Senior civil servants, with limited knowledge of education, have had a key role in the managerial drive which has swept aside concerns and pushed ahead with the political agenda.

In all of this, there has been limited input by the academic community in Scotland. It might be thought that a government that frequently boasts of wishing to develop 'evidence informed' policy might make better use of the research findings produced by staff in university faculties of education. That has not been the case. Researchers have been viewed with suspicion, especially those who show an inclination to question orthodoxies and resist pressures to put a positive spin on their results. There is, in fact, a strong vein of anti-intellectualism within some parts of the Scottish educational establishment.

This is reflected in the courses of initial training offered to teachers which, in the opinion of many, offer inadequate preparation for the professional demands they will face in the classroom, particularly in terms of encouraging them to think of important principles, not just current practices. It is perhaps not surprising that Scotland finds it difficult to attract highly qualified people to teaching, especially in subjects such as science and maths. By contrast, Singapore recruits its teachers from the top 5% of graduates.

The government's preferred response to apparent weaknesses has not been to listen to the voices of classroom teachers but to launch a series of highprofile 'initiatives', such as the Scottish Attainment Challenge, which promise much but, in the opinion of some of those who have to administer them, have not been properly thought through. The latest proposal has been to reform the 'governance' of schools. This is seen as an attempt at further centralisation, masquerading as a plan to devolve more power to headteachers.

At a recent meeting in Edinburgh attended by primary and secondary heads, officials from local authorities, parent representatives and college and university staff, there was scepticism about whether the proposals would work. What was interesting, however, was that there was general agreement that underlying the current problems was a deep cultural issue: the tendency of too many people in Scottish education, especially at senior levels, to respond in a conformist and compliant way to ill-judged policies emanating from the centre. In other words, there was a lack of intellectual leadership. To improve our educational system will require not only an honest acknowledgement of where

mistakes have been made, but also a willingness to engage with hard questions about the fundamental aims and values of schooling.

Is it likely that this will now happen, in the light of the PISA findings? Already the Cabinet Secretary for Education, John Swinney, while describing the results as 'unacceptable', has signalled his intention to press ahead with his existing programme. Initial responses from teachers (as judged by letters in the national press) have been hostile. They doubt whether carrying on regardless will be in the best interests of their pupils. A government that is convinced it knows best, that only listens to those who tell it what it wants to hear, that thinks that shallow rhetoric about 'excellence' and 'equity' constitutes a coherent strategy, and that seems to regard independent thinking as a crime against the state, is unlikely to be able to address the scale of the challenge that we now face.

# Gordonstoun and a question of trust

Allan Shiach

2017

In 1956, Gordonstoun School was in transition between the founding spirit of Kurt Hahn, an educational genius who ran the school by force of his (warm, eccentric) personality and a more traditional headmaster and his colleagues. It is not widely appreciated today, perhaps because of the distraction of the royal connection to the school, that Hahn was a unique and highly influential educational polymath. He had previously founded Schule Schloss Salem in Germany in the 1920s, until driven to Britain by the Nazi regime. He founded Gordonstoun originally in Wales in the 30s and eventually in Scotland.

It was Kurt Hahn who inspired and helped to found the Duke of Edinburgh Award scheme as well as the United World College of the Atlantic, an affiliate of United World Colleges, which also derive their inspiration from his work and ideas. The liberal and progressive education of the Atlantic schools has spread across the world with centres in China, Africa, the USA, Singapore and elsewhere. His ideas and assistance created half a dozen other schools: Anavryta in Greece, Louisenlund in Germany, Boxhill and Rannoch in the UK, Ibadan in Nigeria and the Athenian School in the USA.

As if this were not enough, Hahn was the inspiration, origination and guiding hand in the Outward Bound movement, which has flourished over 50 years with some 40 schools and 200,000 pupils each year seeking to develop interpersonal growth and leadership skills through the use of challenging outdoor activities.

Gordonstoun's school motto was a simple one: *Plus est en vous*. In 1956, just three years after Hahn had retired, a handful of the teachers were still left over from the *ancien régime*, one or two of them among the best teachers I was ever to experience. Especially in English, which some spoke with a heavy German accent but with a passion and freshness unparalleled in mere English schools. Their pastoral interest in the boys was undoubted. Gordonstoun was, in those days, a boys only school. The prep school, also boys only, was situated a dozen miles away in a valley of the River Spey. The pre-prep, which no longer exists, was – curiously – a mixed boarding school, though at ages up to 11, the boys had a limited interest in what girls might contribute to their social lives.

Gordonstoun itself consisted then of about eight large buildings, sprawled across a fairly bleak landscape in what was once called the Laich of Moray. The school was wedged in its sprawl between the end of a very active runway and some fairly spectacular sea cliffs which plunged down to and overlooked the coldest sea in the British Isles. Pilots from the Royal Naval airbase adjoining the school grounds were told that landing in the Moray Firth without protective equipment gave one a life expectancy of about 20

minutes. This was in July or August, so the temperature of the sea was a significant factor in the weather patterns of the school's micro-climate.

During my time there in the mid to late 50s, fighter planes had only recently been developed to fly at speeds in excess of the sound barrier. This resulted in sonic booms – a kind of explosive crash of sound – interrupting classes several times during the day. The airbase hadn't been told that a plane flying faster than the sound barrier was environmentally unwelcome and the flights over school and aerodrome occurred regularly each week for two or three years.

I managed to appoint myself as roving reporter for the school 'newspaper' which I had founded along with the rather senior and superior Anthony Haden-Guest. But while Anthony stayed in his study and wrote think pieces (for the rest of his productive and colourful life), I was permitted to accompany our various rescue services on their call-outs. The fire service was once summoned to the site of a crashed plane at the airbase. Your rugged reporter accompanied them as they arrived, somewhat late, at the site where there was little to do but gaze at the twisted wreckage and the burned broom surrounding it. The pilot's body had been removed. But the rugged reporter was nonetheless able to take a fairly grisly photograph of the late pilot's helmet lying on the ground with just a few stains of ash inside its metal curves.

The photo was pulled down from the early edition and replaced with a general scene of the crash site alongside an anodyne report of the event. But it haunts me to this day.

My housemaster was one of Hahn's friends from Salem. Erich Meissner looked like an animated cartoon of an absent-minded professor with his shock of white hair, his large black-rimmed glasses, his wayward duffle coat and his full-sized poodle, Ponto, ever at his side. No child who lived in the Round Square house was ever in doubt about Meissner's genuine pastoral interest in each of us. Sudden impulsive gestures of kindness or praise were interspersed with curious distancing or apparent disinterest. He was a brilliant teacher. English and ancient history were his main subjects, certainly his main enthusiasms. It is hard now to recall the ways in which passion for a subject communicates to a child studying the subject, but Meissner's interest, knowledge and love for literature and history were his teaching methods of genius.

I was once paying little heed as he read something aloud to the class from a Churchill biography. It was dull and he was rarely dull. At the end of the reading, he asked the class to write a precis of what he had just read to us. My inattention led to my daring to write a single sentence because I knew no more. Fearing a severe dressing down, I wrote what I knew and that was little enough: 'War does not always solve political problems nor does victory always go to the most just cause'. It was obviously going to receive a very poor mark and would identify the boy in the class who cared least about the topic.

'A brilliant precis', said Meissner, flourishing my essay. 'Concise, accurate and brief. This receives an alpha plus and the class is dismissed to enjoy some free time'.

The only other time when my unwillingness to be involved resulted in a happy

outcome for everyone was when playing cricket for the Round Square against Duffus House during a summer term. I loathed cricket but my friend Henry Head was keeping score that day so I contrived to be placed on the boundary, close to the pavilion and far enough away from the cricketing activity to enjoy a natter with the scorer on a pleasant afternoon. A shout of warning was the first I knew that a hard, spherical object was heading straight for me. I raised my hands in self-defence and prevented the ball from breaking my nose. The headmaster, Henry Brereton, happened to be walking past at this moment and declared it the best catch he had ever seen on the front lawn. So good, indeed, that to celebrate it he cancelled all classes for the rest of the day.

The school uniform at that time was dark blue shorts, grey shirt and dark blue sweater in the mornings. After sports activities and a shower, a light grey uniform in the afternoons. Only new boys wore the dark blue uniform all day long to denote their status. The ultimate punishment was the shame of being reduced to the status of dark blue all day long. I saw it happen only twice and in both cases witnessed the boys earn their way back to the light grey uniform. It seems so curious that a sanction like that really worked but Gordonstoun had peculiar institutional rules and regulations, many of them based on a so-called trust system.

One major item of the trust system was called the training plan. This was a small diary which each pupil kept and filled out on a daily basis. It required the pupil to fulfil a number of simple activities and mark whether these had been carried out or not with a tick or a cross. Any prize for best boarding school trivia would surely have been led by the questions on a training plan. Eating between meals? Brush teeth twice daily? Twenty press-ups? Ten rope climbs? A dozen specified activities were recorded by the pupil (more usually once a week in a hurry than the daily observance sought) and the boys were told that no punishment would follow if they had not carried out these tasks; it was merely to provide a record for the child himself to monitor his own behaviour.

Dr Meissner would ask for your training plan from time to time and scowl over it before returning it without comment. The only omission which might lead to punishment was failure to fill the diary in on a daily basis.

I was a middling student, content within the school yet fairly miserable at the separation from family. Despite my home being less than five miles away, I was not permitted visits and only made contact by one or two telephone calls and several letters per term, as was common to all the residents. (*The Boarding School Syndrome*, by Joy Schaverien, brilliantly demonstrates how these unique British institutions turn healthy young men into lifelong emotionally closed and crippled ones.)

My father had died in a car crash one wintry morning when I was eight years old, during the Christmas holiday. Nevertheless, I was returned to boarding at the pre-prep school barely five days after his funeral. This might nowadays be thought too early after such a shattering event in a family, but in the 50s, after a war which had elevated hardship to heroism, it was simply thought the best way for life to carry on.



In some ways, Gordonstoun was linked exceptionally into my home life since, after my father's death, my mother turned to Kurt Hahn for occasional counsel and advice. Impressive and distant as he was – and an unlikely person in my mother's life who saw her, I suspect, out of sympathy rather than friendship – it was curiously consoling to know that I would be going to the school where Hahn still loomed on the horizon.

My mother's counsellor, when not in Germany or elsewhere in the world, resided with his sister in a charming house called Burnside, adjoining the grounds of the school and a short walk from the dramatic cliffs of the Moray Firth.

Although occasionally deployed in later life as a boast, there is no humiliation greater than to be expelled from a boarding school. Expulsion is not merely separation from lessons but from friends, colleagues and routines. It is a public statement of revulsion at your presence in a community, a statement that you are no longer tolerable in that society. Expulsion was both rare and devastating. During my time at Gordonstoun, only one pupil was expelled and that for a crime of adolescent urges.

During the summer holidays, when I was 15 or 16 and a senior boy in the school with responsibilities and exams at every turn, my mother had invited two old men friends to dinner with their families. Both the men had been at Gordonstoun though neither was close to the faculty nor had any lingering association with the school. But they were curious and I was voluble. I told them how the so-called trust system seemed to me not to be working any longer. The training plan was barely taken seriously, the daily exercises only fulfilled by the most punctilious or junior. I noted that it was a significant additional burden upon children to describe these essentially trivial things as part of a trust system. To break trust is a serious matter. To neglect your rope skipping was a minor misdemeanour, yet was to be taken as a breach of trust.

I went on to explain that the punishment system – which mainly consisted of being given formal country walks of between two and five miles depending on the gravity of the offence – was also carried out on the basis of trust. Nobody checked you in or out of your punishment, but you were trusted to carry it out yourself. And everyone knew somebody who had been punished and had made a great show of only the first 500 yards of their punishment.

The following term, immediately after breakfast, I was summoned to Dr Meissner's suite, consisting of a large living room in which he executed his impressive paintings at a permanent easel. Off some dark recess beyond were his private study, his bedroom and bathroom.

I had come to know the room when, as a younger student, he had asked me to pose for him, to be a model for a painting. This required me to stand naked while he sketched. I was not the first subject of this flattery, others had done the same without incident. But there is a certain compulsion to comply when the man in charge of your life and school career suggests you attend as a nude model. Pupils were well aware of their housemaster's frequent presence at shower or bath time. He did absolutely nothing except paint, nor

was there any hint of impropriety, yet by today's standards it was both risky and dishonourable. *Ars gratia artis*, I think.

On this occasion, my arrival in his study was less than warm and did not include nudity. Dr Meissner accused me of an expellable offence. The charge was 'profound disloyalty to the school'. He reported that an unnamed old boy had detailed how I had libelled the school, claimed the honour system wasn't working and in general denigrated everything Meissner and his colleagues had done to sustain the great work of our great founder. There was no latitude if I admitted to these charges. But first and in fairness I was asked if his was an accurate description of what I had been saying.

I promptly admitted I had said more or less the words attributed to me but not out of disloyalty. I claimed the defence of truth. Nothing I had alleged was untrue no matter how it might have offended him and his colleagues to hear it.

As one allegation was made and rebutted, as one claim was made and discounted, as the day wore on and Meissner's classes were cancelled so that he might give all his time and concentration to this sudden, shocking set of charges, I sat in my dark blue uniform in his study and defended myself.

I gradually began to realise that while my defence – that the trust system was lightly and carelessly abused on a frequent basis was a simple truth – to Dr Meissner and the headmaster, Henry Brereton, this assertion, if indeed it were true, then demolished the very foundation of all that Kurt Hahn and the Gordonstoun ethos were about. This was, in effect, the end of their most profound beliefs.

From time to time, Meissner left me in his study while he consulted with Brereton. He seemed oddly disinterested each time he returned as if he had been charged with a simple task and now needed to carry it out. We broke for lunch. I was instructed to return immediately afterwards and not to discuss the matter with anyone. As I entered the dining room, Meissner gave a grand wave over the seated pupils in the dining room.

'You cast aspersions on them. All of them. You darken them with your allegations'.

He went off to dine elsewhere and left me to avoid ways of explaining my absences from class and common room.

The pause in the interrogation is now a memory blur. It was a day of which, 60 years later, I have both the most vivid recall and no recall at all. Bright, enduring images and foggy interstices. On going back to the study, I was again instructed to attend afternoon activities – athletics – after which the older boys showered and changed into their evening clothes, the distinctive light grey uniform of all but new boys. Or those humiliated by being demoted to the lowest rank.

I was instructed not to change into the evening uniform. Was this likely to be my punishment? Desperately unfair though I felt it to be, I was prepared to endure it. Because by then I had glimpsed that I was in the midst of a bigger, more important battle. Like *The Winslow Boy* I would eventually have to depend upon the only defence available, that of the simple truth.

By the evening, with the interrogation resumed in Meissner's study, I now had two interlocutors, not one. Headmaster Brereton's brisk Anglo-Saxon scepticism allied to Meissner's dark anger over the very possibility that the trust system was failing or being exploited. My own position was invidious since I couldn't name names. But, did boys fill out their training plans during study periods and complete answers for two or three weeks in a few minutes? Yes. So every answer in their training plan was either untrue or merely guessed? Yes. Because the questions were considered trivial.

Did I know of boys who had been set punishment walks who did not actually carry these out? Yes, several, in fact the majority unless the punishments were given by school prefects (known as colour bearers) in which case the risk of being supervised was too great. Was I being so foolish and so extreme as to be charging the whole school with dishonesty?

I didn't think dishonesty was the issue. The boys I knew who laughed at the so-called system were not so much being dishonest as merely seeking to placate the fools who had instituted these 'trust' systems.

The afternoon had lengthened into evening. I was not offered a break for the evening meal and indeed was surprised to realise how late it was when eventually Meissner summoned two of the senior boys from my house, the house of which he was housemaster, the wonderfully-named Round Square. (An entirely circular building, like a bicycle tyre laid flat on the ground, rising two storeys and each filled with dormitories, classrooms, libraries or work spaces. The centre of the circle was filled with a bright green lawn upon which only senior masters were entitled to tread. Ah, the wonderful complexity of scholastic hierarchies.)

The senior boys were asked if it was now past 'lights out'. It was. Nonetheless, said Meissner, only recently? The boys nodded. 'Then summon everyone to this study. The headmaster and I have a question or two to put to everyone. Slippers and dressing gowns.'

While the senior boys went off to gather all the pupils from their dormitories, Meissner with his instinctive eye for drama dragged a desk chair into the centre of the room and sat me upon it, facing the door. He stood behind his desk, behind me, and together we waited in uncompanionable silence as all the Round Square boys entered and formed, as directed, a three-line semi-circle in front of me.

I was barely three feet from all the boys I knew well. Sixty of them, wrapped in dressing gowns, looking about with interest and apprehension. What could this mean? And why was this person, whom all knew well, still in morning uniform? Had he been reduced to the ranks? What was conceivably his offence?

Meissner began with an iteration of the charges. I had been profoundly disloyal to the school. My principal allegation of disloyalty was that I had claimed that the trust system, upon which the school was based, was a mere charade and was not properly observed.

'There will be no individual punishment,' said Meissner, 'for anyone who admits to

having abused or otherwise failed to comply in any way. I will not be taking names. I merely wish to demonstrate that this boy's allegations are wholly false'.

I shifted uncomfortably because I could see the inevitable path this was taking – and I didn't entirely trust the serried rows of friends and acquaintances to admit to the truth.

'Will you please raise your hand,' Meissner's voice had dropped an octave, 'if you have abused the training plan, ignored a punishment or otherwise failed to honour an obligation under our system of trust'.

He paused. The moment for action was delayed.

'Raise your hand if you have ever been less than observant of any of the trusts we place in you.'

He stood back. I stared at my friend Pitro Zafiropulo. I stared at the older boys, my immediate colleagues and at the younger ones whose names I barely knew.

Not a single hand was raised.

Meissner seemed to choke. And then Pitro's hand went up. And James's, too. And another, and another and another. Until among the 60 boys there were at least 45 with their hands raised in the air.

Everyone was dismissed. Meissner could hardly speak as he sent me back to my bed without a further word. He was crushed. The boys themselves – the boys whose lives he cherished and taught and knew – had, by simply raising their hands, utterly devastated him.

So, I was not expelled nor sanctioned in any way. Over the years which followed, the masters of my day were replaced and the Hahn ethos gradually adapted to modern thinking. Girls were admitted – long a Hahn priority – and the nature of the school gradually changed. Short trousers were eliminated, cold showers and other elements of the so-called Spartan regime are gone and the training plan (did you brush your teeth twice?) may or may not still exist to taunt children or staff.

Meissner, to his credit, never said another word about the incident nor against me. Only Brereton sought perhaps some small consolation by writing on my leaving report – the document upon which I would hope to enter a university – 'this is not an academic boy'. The two universities to which I applied appeared to ignore the comment and admitted me anyway.

Kurt Hahn, Henry Brereton and Erich Meissner are dead – their lives fulfilled by their accomplishments and genuine passion for education and belief in the potential for improvement of every child. *Plus est en vous.*

# Scotland the cruel

Carol Craig

2018

Newspapers have recently revealed that the Catholic Church in Scotland is opposed to the Scottish Government's proposed ban on smacking. The church doesn't believe it right for the state 'to interfere' in parenting except in the most exceptional circumstances. A variety of Catholic countries – Spain, Portugal and Ireland – have legislated against smacking, so the opposition to a ban is not inherent in Catholic theology. Indeed the Pope's country – Argentina – has also outlawed the practice.

Part of the Scottish Catholic Church's defence of its view is that, in a 2017 survey, three-quarters of those asked said that smacking should not be a criminal offence. Almost the same number agreed with the view that it was up to parents to decide whether or not to smack their children.

This doesn't surprise me. Some polls show that a majority of Scots still back the return of capital punishment. Authoritarianism runs deep in Scotland. We have a long history of hitting children. The belt was only abolished in 1987 as a result of an edict by the European Court of Human Rights – not because of a change in Scottish public opinion.

In the course of my research for my latest book, *Hiding in Plain Sight: Exploring Scotland's Ill Health*, I asked almost everyone I met about their experience of corporal punishment in school. As yet, I've hardly encountered one Scot of my generation who wasn't belted at some point in their school days – most of them multiple times. As well as the belt, many recount other incidents of teacher violence, such as having wooden blackboard dusters thrown at them. Being struck over the knuckles with a ruler. Repeatedly jabbed in the back or ribs with a finger or pencil or slapped forcefully on the legs. One friend told me that his technical teacher struck him on the head from behind with a block of wood. He fell to the floor unconscious.

Many remember teachers at secondary school wearing their belts over their shoulders like scarves, or under their gowns, so they could whip them out at the slightest provocation. Lots of people report that some teachers in their school, both primary and secondary, were sadists or psychopaths. Others maintain their teachers were 'kinky', as they appeared to get a perverted pleasure out of beating children or adolescents.

Official guidance in Scotland said that the belt should only be given for disciplinary offences and not for poor academic performance. But people were certainly belted for that. In some teachers' classes, spelling mistakes, errors in sums, not knowing French vocabulary, forgetting poems... all warranted a good belting. One man I know was belted every Monday morning at his Catholic school for not remembering the catechism.

As most of the people I spoke to performed well at school and went on to university,

I've been surprised by how many of them recounted numerous incidents. At secondary school, these beltings were often for lateness or because the teacher had decided to belt the whole class. In primary school, teachers often belted pupils for talking or misbehaving in line. Or it could be for some bizarre and totally unpredictable reason.

I have also been surprised by how many girls were belted at primary school. One woman, now a GP, told me that when she was seven she put one foot on the road when out on a school trip. The teacher belted her when they returned to school. Another female doctor recounts being belted when she was five for pleating the hair of the girl in front of her in class. My close friend, latterly a professor, says she was belted every week in primary school because she was giggling or talking (i.e. behaving like a child) or the teacher wanted to put her in her place. Another said she was continually belted or hit with a ruler for 'dumb insolence'.

There were much worse incidents than the ones I've heard from friends. Someone posted the following question on a Glasgow discussion board online: 'Did you get the belt at school, how many, what for and did it work?' Last time I looked, there were 571 comments. Many of the incidents people relate are awful. For example, one woman recounts that she was so frightened of her primary 1 teacher that she didn't ask to go to the toilet. She wet the floor. The teacher then belted the scared infant.

One man recounts that, in his first day at secondary school, one of the teachers belted him as they shared the same surname. The teacher wanted to prove to the class there would be no favouritism. Another woman tells us that she got the belt seven times one morning in primary 2 for not being able to remember a prayer. Some recounted getting 12 strokes of the belt. Others say they had to put their hands above a desk so their knuckles hit it, thus doubling the pain.

As well as anecdotes, there are some studies which corroborate the extensive use of corporal punishment in Scottish schools. A study of 40,000 school leavers conducted in 1980 found that only one in 20 Scottish boys went through secondary school without being belted. A 1977 study found that more than a third of 12-15-year-old boys received the belt at least once in 10 school days. A fifth received it three or more times during this period. This figure undermines the argument that the belt had a deterrent effect.

In both his books on the history of modern Scotland, Kenneth Roy admirably chronicles the authoritarianism of the nation's recent past. Using official figures he estimates that, in Edinburgh alone, teachers used the belt 30,000 times in one year.

Roy also recounts how the treatment of young people in approved schools was even worse. Modern guidelines for teachers on use of the belt specified that it could only be used on hands. Not so in approved schools mainly for delinquents, where teachers could apply the stout Lochgelly tawse to the buttocks. Scottish education department documents from the 1970s, published under the 30-year rule, show that corporal punishment was used 10 times more often in Scotland's approved schools than their English equivalents.

It is common for people to feel shocked at how children were treated in previous eras, so readers may think that what happened in 20th century Scotland was normal. It wasn't. Poland was the first country to abolish corporal punishment in schools and it did this in 1783. Corporal punishment of any kind ceased in French schools in 1887. Russia abolished it in 1917, and China in 1949. If we look at the progressive European countries we would like to emulate, we'll find that they abolished corporal punishment in schools decades ago: Finland (1914); Netherlands (1920); Italy (1928); Sweden (1928); Norway (1936); Luxembourg (1945); and Denmark (1947).

The English-speaking world was not as eager to outlaw corporal punishment in schools: New Zealand banned it in 1989, Canadian provinces followed suit in the 1990s, and there are some states in Australia and America which still permit it.

There's little doubt that posh independent schools in the UK were the world leaders in physically punishing pupils, particularly with the cane. A disturbing new book by Alex Renton called *Stiff Upper Lip: Secrets, Crimes and the Schooling of a Ruling Class*, exposes the severe physical punishment meted out to pupils in UK public schools, particularly boarding schools, right up to the turn of this century. Canings and similar types of punishment weren't just the preserve of school masters and headteachers. In many posh establishments, including prep schools, prefects were also given the power to beat their younger peers. Indeed, Renton argues that the British establishment had to be forced to ban corporal punishment in schools because it had been so much part of their schooling that they thought it 'normal'.

Some state schools in England also used the cane, and corporal punishment was widespread throughout the country until the Westminster Parliament banned it in 1986 – one year before Scotland. Some local authority areas banned caning decades before, but permitted use of the slipper or a slap with the hand. Newcastle schools used a Scottish-style belt. What is clear is that, while corporal punishment was widely used in English state schools, it wasn't nearly as prevalent as it was in Scotland. Some local authorities didn't allow girls to be disciplined in this way. Primary school children were much less likely to be hit, and some secondary schools didn't use corporal punishment at all.

Colin Farrell, in an article for the Corpun website, maintains that the Scottish prevalence levels for corporal punishment, cited earlier, suggest 'a considerably higher level of usage of CP overall in Scotland than in England and Wales'. This chimes with the experiences of many people I've spoken to. Sue Palmer, author of *Toxic Childhood* and founder of Upstart, was educated in England, then trained as a teacher at Moray House in Edinburgh. Sue has subsequently worked extensively in education both north and south of the border. She maintains that, at least from the 1960s, corporal punishment was less frequently employed (and less harsh) in English than in Scottish state schools.

There were always a few Scottish teachers who didn't resort to this type of discipline, and there were some inspiring figures like the educationalist and headteacher, R F

MacKenzie, who argued against it. However, he was sacked in 1974 for banning the belting of girls in his school.

Scottish schools were thirled to use of the belt for the simple reason that education authorities, and the vast majority of teachers and parents, believed that its use was essential for discipline. In his definitive history of Scotland, *The Scottish Nation*, Professor Tom Devine states that Scottish culture 'completely accepted' corporal punishment. Adding: 'The parents were all for it'.

And they would be for the simple reason that many of them were also using corporal punishment at home. The social historian Richard Finlay makes some interesting observations about Scottish childhood in the 1930s. There was an unusually wide range of words associated with physical punishment. 'Leathering', 'battering', 'tanning', 'skelping', 'bleaching', 'whipping', 'hammering', 'roasting', 'hiding' and 'thrashing' were familiar expressions for most children, as was the term 'doing', as in, 'You'll get a doing'.

These words were also current in the 1950s and 60s when I was growing up. Finlay also points out that physical punishment was so much the norm that neighbours, shopkeepers and the police would also give kids a 'clout on the ear or a kick in the arse'. Youngsters would not want their parents to know that they had been hit by teachers or other adults because they were likely to get another belting.

The comedian Billy Connolly, who was severely abused as a child, jokes about the 'strange things' parents said to children. 'Can I go out on my bike?' 'What? Bike? I'll give you bike...' 'Can I go to the pictures?' 'What, pictures is it? I'll pictures you my lad... I'll make you smile on the other side of your face... I'll take my hand off your face.'

This type of punishment was (and still is) meted out to children in other countries of the world, but there are three reasons why hitting children may have been particularly common here. First, Scotland had atrocious overcrowding and poor housing conditions, so there was lots of family stress including commonplace hostility between men and women. Stress can easily lead to violence. Second, Scotland for centuries was a deeply religious country and greatly influenced by the Old Testament and its belief that it is wrong to 'spare the rod'. Finally, Scotland had high levels of street violence – people took offence easily and were quick to use their hands.

A few decades ago, Scotland didn't change its mind about belting children at school. There was no widespread public campaign against it. It was the principled objection of two mothers which ultimately ended corporal punishment in Scotland. They argued that they should have the right as parents to say whether their child should be belted, and they took their case to the European Court of Human Rights. Scottish education authorities and the British state fought hard for the status quo, but ultimately, the mothers won. Corporal punishment in Scottish state schools finally ended in 1987 and in independent schools in 2000. There's little doubt that state schools in Scotland have changed remarkably since then.

Did it matter that in Scotland it was commonplace for teachers and parents to



physically chastise their children? People often recount adverse events in childhood such as beatings and bullying and then say it 'didn't do me any harm'. Victims often argue that such events toughened them up and boosted their resilience. But we now know from the extensive research into Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) that violence directed to children (and other experiences of family life) can have negative consequences. Neuroscience shows that unpredictable, fearful events can have an extremely negative effect on children's developing brains.

What's more, a meta-analysis of 50-years-worth of studies, encompassing more than 160,000 children, found that spanking was associated with long-lasting effects into adulthood including more mental health problems, aggression, lower self-esteem and poor relationships with parents. Not everyone suffers long-term effects from physical chastisement, but many do.

If a person's only exposure to violence was a few beltings at secondary school, this may not have affected them too badly. But minimal exposure was uncommon. Many young people, from the infant class on, were repeatedly belted. In Scotland, the education system was designed to instill fear. This is why Scottish teachers were encouraged to use the belt on a pupil in front of the whole class. My dragon primary 2 teacher never took me over her knee and smacked me, but I lived every day in fear that she would, and it was terrible to witness her meting out this punishment to classmates for trivial, unpredictable offences. I'm sure I wasn't the only six-year-old child sitting in that class, holding my breath and experiencing 'toxic stress' for the simple reason that there was no escape.

America's southern 'bible belt' states share some of Scotland's heritage. They too have a deeply religious past influenced by the Old Testament. Many of these states were even founded by Ulster Scots or the 'Scots Irish', as the Americans say. Nineteen of these states still use corporal punishment in schools. Research shows that those punished in this way are more like to be African American or disabled. People in these states also argue ferociously for parents' right to hit their children. They also incarcerate a higher number of citizens than northern states and use capital punishment.

If the Catholic Church in Scotland and other ordinary Scots opposed to a smacking ban get their way, the nation will effectively align itself with the American south and ignore the fact that 52 countries in the world have now banned smacking. We can't allow that to happen. We must seize this opportunity and start facing up to the fact that how we raise children is Scotland's Achilles' heel.

# Scotland's great taboo

Gerry Hassan

2018

Scottish education has always had an important, even disproportionate place in society – emphasising its distinctiveness, traditions, individual stories and experiences. Yet our education system has had for all the good and positive stories, too many which are bad and dark. This legacy continues today. For all the pride in the best of our schools and education, there has been a historical culture of fear, punishment and violence, with teachers and authorities using power inappropriately to control children.

These attitudes are often assumed to be in the past, but they haven't left us fully. A ComRes survey at the end of 2017, produced due to Scottish Government-backed proposals to ban the smacking of children, showed that a tolerance of violence was widespread. 74% of adults in Scotland surveyed did not think that smacking a child should be a criminal offence; 70% said smacking was not child abuse; an astonishing 85% said they were smacked as a child, while 66% said it was sometimes necessary to smack a child.

We have grown up with a culture of violence towards children which, not surprisingly, still affects present-day attitudes. A recent debate on belting began with Carol Craig's piece in *SR*, which motivated Ian Jack to reply in *The Guardian*. He stated that belting might have been 'unfair' but that it 'had done me no harm' – a view that unleashed an avalanche of reflections about corporal punishment and violence against children.

I have long been an admirer of Ian Jack as a writer – as he has consistently shown an emotional depth and awareness of the importance of detail, stories and memories – but here his assertion of 'no harm' seemed to be at best superficial and too narrow, and at worse denying deeper factors. Carol Craig responded, recognising that this is important in how we bring up children, but with ramifications to this day way beyond schools and education.

What was noteworthy and revelatory in this exchange was that it tapped into real voices and experiences. At the heart of educational and professional class Scotland we still hear very little from those for whom this matters the most – young people – and next to nothing of substance about the consequences of punishment and violence.

If you think that is an overstatement, look at two huge tomes – David McCrone's recently published *The New Sociology of Scotland*, and the academic *Scottish Education*. Both have no individual or former pupils talking about how education worked or didn't work for them, and not one person commenting on what it was like to be punished or disciplined.

What is still too prevalent in our culture is a pronounced dichotomy between public

and private language and debate on education. This used to be a characteristic which defined much of Scottish Labour Party discussions on the subject when the party was the leading force in the land, and was filled with lots of teachers as party members (when the party also ran many councils). In private, people would talk about all sorts of things such as what to do with bad teachers (how to identify them, retraining, weeding them out) and how to encourage and reward good teachers. Yet, in public, this distinction between good and bad teachers was missing from all Labour considerations – deemed too politically hot a topic due to the institutional power of the teacher unions within the Labour Party.

Now, with Labour out of office nationally and locally, such a self-denying ordinance of two very different public and private languages seems to have become internalised by the SNP.

Maybe some of this controlling of debate around education is as much cultural as anything else. It is a system of social control and order, and has probably been strengthened by the power of identification with education in Scotland, and the potent myths and folklore around it: the idea that our education system was once the best in the world; the invoking of the much misunderstood 'democratic intellect'; the respect given to the importance of the lad o'pairs. And maybe all of this has contributed to our collective silence on corporal punishment.

Personal experiences matter if we are to break the taboos and silences. Thirteen years of Dundee state education gave me many wonderful moments. I had the privilege to be part of the rising tide of post-war Scottish society – and the last wave of that in the late 1970s – one which inculcated in myself and many of my friends a confidence, security, optimism and curiosity about the world.

Like many lucky children, my life was blessed and enriched by a host of inspirational, supportive teachers who encouraged inquiry and discovery. These ranged from Miss Holroyd, Mrs Stewart and Mrs McLaren at Ardler Primary School, to David Low and Alex Stanley at Rockwell High School, in Dundee. But it also saw me, like many others, belted on numerous occasions.

One occasion in primary school still jars with me. We had to correctly spell 10 words each day, and on one notable occasion, after 27 consecutive days of 100% spelling accuracy, I got three words wrong which led to being automatically belted, which sometimes produced a long daily queue. This leaves a sour taste even today. I noted that there was no prize or even recognition for excellence, but instant identification and punishment for failure.

In secondary school, I had a maths teacher who enjoyed belting more than he enjoyed maths. A French teacher, who had little authority or ability to hold a class, belted so much that he went, due to the amount of practice, from being a very poor belter to a very good one; thus finding the only area of teaching that he excelled at.

The biggest lesson in this for me was long-lasting and damaging. It taught me for the

first time how to lie – and how to lie to my parents. As a child, you have a propensity to tell the truth until the world and experience points out the occasional cost and folly of this.

The first time I was belted in primary school, I innocently went home and told my parents expecting sympathy. Instead, they assumed that I was in the wrong and told me off. The next time I was belted, I did not tell my parents and kept it to myself to avoid double punishment. This set a pattern for future belting in primary and secondary.

Being belted had a class and gender dimension. It was proportionately more about working-class kids, and more boys than girls being belted. Ian Jack could not recall any girls being belted in his school years, which beggars belief. There is also a state/private school divide. For all the brutality of certain private schools, many privately-educated pupils I know sailed through their entire education never being belted once – hence further widening the class divide. Belting contributed harm and punishment, and reinforced a Scottish crisis of confidence in a significant number of state-educated pupils.

There has, considering the prevalence of this, been a manufactured, deliberate silence across society, which isn't healthy or productive, and which is long overdue for change. Maybe we should accept that, for the mass majority of Scots, there was no such thing as a golden era of education. Instead, we had at its best a system which rewarded a 'meritocratic' elite, while using punitive measures, discipline and control, to keep the vast majority of the population accustomed to being diminished, marginalised and not listened to in their lives.

If we could begin to reclaim what, for many, might be painful and traumatic experiences, then it might assist in understanding the many moral anxieties and doubts which exist about our current education system, and begin a debate about changing it for the better and actually doing something. We might understand that some of our contemporary worries are a delayed response to the harm and violence inflicted on many, and that our wider cultural attitudes of being disinclined to take risks, put our heads above the parapet, and make mistakes, are linked to its continued shadow. Other countries emerging from authoritarian pasts – such as post-communist central and eastern European countries – would have some similar experiences.

All over the Western world since the 1960s, we have been reacting to the limits of traditional authority, challenging and overthrowing their ancient regimes, and then living with the unintended consequences of a freedom which isn't as we planned or wanted. We have gone from a world of judgemental, even sometimes belittling, authority to a world where we are meant to trust no-one but our own self and the market.

Instead, we have to remake the good idea of authority that we create and make ourselves based on consent and equality. Eliane Glaser put it succinctly: 'We need to disentangle authority from privilege, and find new ways to ensure that authority is constituted of knowledge, experience and conduct'.

This is about much more than the Scottish tradition of living in the past. One

*Guardian* comment said: 'Why are we harping back to something which has been gone for 40 years?... So I say again, move on, and be grateful that we are trying to build a better, kinder, fairer country for future generations'. But it isn't that simple unless we break through the taboos and silences which have defined so much of Scotland, its culture of violence, and infantilisation of a large section of the adult population.

Carol Craig said that 'how we raise children is Scotland's Achilles' heel', and ended her response to Ian Jack saying that our 'belt-happy culture' has 'had a negative, and an unexpected effect on Scottish culture'. This is a debate as important as that over Scotland's constitutional status, if not even more critical: it is about how we nurture, protect and love our future generations. What could be more important than that? Isn't that central to the kind of Scotland we want to be and bring about in the future?

# The schools that don't do happy

John McGrath

2018

According to the Programme for International Assessment (PISA) league tables, we are about as good at educating our children as we are at playing world-class football. That is, we are not very good. New PISA results should be out this year, but at the last round in 2015, Scotland fell in the league table for science from 'above average' to 'average'. We have scored 'average' at maths and reading for some years.

Teaching should be one of the most rewarding pastimes possible. Education is the keystone of civilisation itself. Learning, like eating, is something we all naturally have an appetite for. It should be a pleasure. If a child goes off their food, we worry and look for the cause. Perhaps they are ill or there's something wrong with the food. Many of our children it seems are being put off learning, and that should worry us too. What are we doing wrong?

I'm a former teacher – there are plenty out there – from a family of teachers. My two brothers, two sisters, mother and father were all teachers. All of us left the profession early, most disillusioned and glad to get out.

It was not through the academic attainment of our pupils, or lack of it, that disillusioned most of the ex-teachers I know. It was the working culture. The never-ending stress-inducing discipline warfare. The archaic hierarchical relationship between heads and staff that leaves teachers feeling like they themselves are children. I think, and I am sure I am not alone, that if we are to improve our position in the PISA league, it is not a change in the curriculum we need, it's a change in culture.

I started teaching physics and maths in Bannerman High in Baillieston in 1984 – about the time the belt was banned. While doing my teacher training the year before in Auchmuty High in Fife, the then head of maths, after watching my feeble attempt to control a rowdy class, told me that the secret was to wait for an unequivocal misdemeanour from the weakest of the rabble and belt him. His reasoning being that if I belted the strongest and he laughed, my authority would be further undermined. It's a tactic used by authoritarians the world over I'm sure. I didn't do it, I've never hit a child in my life, and he gave me a bad 'crit' perhaps as a result – unfortunately, not a bad enough crit to get me chucked out.

In my second year as a qualified teacher in Bannerman High, in a moment of insanity, I volunteered to go on a week-long school trip by bus to Blankenberge in Belgium. I remember the bald tyres of the bus hardly able to make it up any slight incline and the maths teacher I fancied flirting with every man in Belgium but me. Before departing, each teacher signed a form verifying that they were aware of being in *loco parentis* –

Spanish for 'being like a parent gone mental' and, in fact, behaving like a parent gone mental was the *de facto* replacement for the belt. Teachers took to shouting like Sergeant Major Tudor Bryn 'Shut Up' Williams, and have continued to do so to this day. I think it is time for this to stop. Shouting at children, like the belt, should be banned.

Can you imagine the change in culture that would bring about? It could be done. A small bell, a telephone app, with a tinkle like the gentle tinkle to mark the start of the speeches at a wedding would ring, and if some difficult child refused to pay attention, they would be quietly and politely asked to leave the room. A button on the electronic register – something used in most Scottish schools today – would text the parent with a simple message: 'Your son/daughter was excluded from French today because they would not *ferme la bouche*'. The parents could phone the child immediately and disciplinary matters could return to the place they belong. Gone the pulsing neck vein and iron-tight abdomen. Back peace, health, happiness and civilisation.

Where else in life are people shouted at in such a way? In the Army and in prison. Do our schools really belong in that category? Don't get me wrong, I'm not a fan of exclusion and know, as most teachers do, that the troublesome children are the ones who need our support most. But there must be better ways to do it than shouting at them.

By the 90s, I had escaped high school into further education and only now revisit the Scottish high school experience this time as a parent of a first-year pupil. At a welcome evening for new intake parents, we were handed a single-page document showing a family tree of boxes full of words. I discovered only when I got to the beginning that I was reading it backwards. My eyes were drawn first to the busy complex right side of the page, where the boxes were small and the writing denser. I assumed I would find important information there. I didn't. Scanning to the left, the boxes got bigger but curiously, in an *Alice in Wonderland* way, the words in each of them became fewer, with the largest left-most box shouting in capitals only two words: 'BECOME EXTRAORDINARY'.

Hyperbole inflation is epidemic. Official documents are littered with comic superlatives. Excellence is now 'extraordinary', as if by this hyperbole inflation and telekinesis we will somehow 'will' things to get better. Nowhere on the document of ever subdivided objectives could I find the word 'HAPPINESS'. Happiness, a right mentioned in the American constitution, is not it seems a right for our children or staff in our schools. My heart sank into a pit when the school careers officer was brought on to wind this welcome evening up. Oblivious to the inappropriateness of his appearance in front of the parents of 11-year-olds, he said nothing meaningful, his presence reminding us simply that this school was not in the business of making happy, clever young people – it was in the business of manufacturing workers.

My brother's daughter, one year younger than mine, started middle school in Jersey City this year. He posted a picture of her on day one standing in the sun. Wearing trainers and dressed in bright colours, she looked a bit like a wee Aberdeen supporter. I

took a picture of my daughter too on her first day at high school, dressed in joyless black from head to foot, her white blouse the only thing likely to make her at all visible on a dark winter afternoon. It is a common school uniform across Scotland. A sartorial echo presumably of the mourning apparel worn by Queen Victoria after the death of Albert in 1861, the era in which many state schools were founded.

The fact that some of the older girls in my daughters' school have taken to removing their black skirt altogether turning up wearing only sheer black tights when there is snow on the ground is an additional reason Victorian uniforms, as well as the shouting, must go. It's a grim and oppressive way to be forced to dress, and invites protest and opposition. On occasional Fridays, the children are 'allowed' to wear smart-casual clothing, and when they do, they suddenly seem transformed into young responsible adults. Why can't they always go to school dressed like that? Perhaps because they also seem to be happier, and happiness is a threat – a portent of anarchy.

An Italian friend of mine offered some insight. He worked as an art teacher in an Edinburgh comprehensive. His observations of Scottish high school culture were astute. The children disliked the teachers and the teachers disliked the children, and all of them disliked being in school, were unhappy, and couldn't wait to go home. It did not help that the phonetic of my friend's surname, deliberately mispronounced in a Scottish accent, sounded a little like 'O' Fanny', a weapon the children quickly grasped and used incessantly to knock his spirit down to the level of his demoralised Scottish colleagues.

When a job came up in Italy, Mr 'O' Fanny' was off back to a world where school opened at 8am and closed at 1pm. Where many teachers had afternoon jobs. The FTT teacher made bespoke cakes, the technical teacher doubled as a joiner, the art teacher illustrated children's books. They did real world work that kept their skills up, got them out of the world of children into the world of grown-ups, and no doubt helped prevent them from going *loco parentis*.

My daughter's school is one rung on the ladder below the Edinburgh state school average in pupil attainment. Becoming ordinary would be an achievement. Like many other Scottish state schools, it is missing teachers due to shortages, but probably more due to daily illness. They are often sick. Sick of going to work. When my daughter reports that a teacher has been absent she gestures 'sick' with air quotes, so openly is this view held. It has seen cuts to support for students with extra needs and has all the usual struggles. Some of this could be solved with more money of course, but a change in culture? Fresh air. A new way of doing things? What would that do?

I know things are not as black and white as my daughter's uniform. I now teach for the Open University and one of my students this year is a young teacher bubbling with enthusiasm for the job. I can't say I'm worried about the next set of PISA results either. Being an average nation is fine by me. I don't want excellence or world-class learning, I want happiness.



# It's time to abolish private education in the UK

Gerry Hassan

2019

Britain's elites have never been more self-serving, self-sustaining and only interested in looking after themselves – aided by private education. All of a sudden, the subject of private schools is back on the public agenda, aided by a decade of austerity, stalled living standards and the evaporation of social mobility. This has brought home to many, who would not have previously thought of it, the role of private education in looking after a very select and privileged few.

According to research by the Sutton Trust in 2016, 74% of judges, 71% of barristers, 71% of senior military personnel and 32% of MPs in Britain today were privately-educated. This trend has spread into the worlds of culture, entertainment and sport, with 60% of British winners of Oscars and 42% of BAFTA winners having been privately-educated, along with 41% of UK medallists in the 2012 London Olympics.

The slow march to equality which was evident over the 20th century has now stopped, and in some places has even gone into reverse. A study of *Who's Who* showed that of entrants who had been born between 1830 and 1920, 50-60% were privately-educated, whereas for those born between the 1930s and 1960s, the figure was 45%, and for those new entrants of the 21st century, it was also 45%.

The defence of private education is one we are all familiar with – it is about parental choice and freedom to decide what to do with your own money. There is an argument that it encourages both competition and partnership with the state sector. And also that people choosing private education are paying *twice* for education through taxes and are therefore freeing up capacity in the state system. Yet, the arguments *against* private education refute these points. It is a form of social apartheid and represents a refusal of part of society to integrate with the rest of us. We *all* lose as a society by pushy parents taking themselves and their kids out of the state sector.

A tiny minority of UK children – 6.5% – are privately-educated. Yet this tiny minority distorts society, politics and how we even think about intelligence and success. Some 24% of secondary school-aged children in Edinburgh are privately-educated. In 2017, Oxford University's student intake was 42.3% privately-educated, Cambridge 37.4%, Durham 37.1%, Imperial College 36.5%, St Andrews 35.6%, and Edinburgh 33.6%.

We, as a society, subsidise private education. With charitable status, such schools can claim relief on non-domestic rates, when many are clearly private businesses. It was revealed in 2014 that Fettes in Edinburgh reduced what they paid each year in non-domestic rates from £209,139 to £41,828 – and this when their annual turnover was just

under £20m. This works out as a subsidy from the rest of us of £167,311 per annum to an already privileged tiny group.

George Orwell wrote in *The Lion and the Unicorn*, published in 1941, of the need to 'democratise [the] educational system'. 'We could start by abolishing the autonomy of the public schools and the older universities and flooding them with state-aided pupils chosen simply on grounds of ability.'

In Tony Crosland's magnum opus, *The Future of Socialism*, published in 1956, he wrote: 'We shall not have equality of opportunity so long as we maintain a system of superior private schools, open to the wealthier classes, but out of reach of poorer children however talented and deserving'. Six years later in *The Conservative Enemy*, he went even further: 'The public schools offend not only against the "weak", let alone the "strong", ideal of equal opportunity; they offend even more against any ideal of social cohesion or democracy... This privileged stratum of education... is the greatest single cause of stratification and class consciousness in Britain'.

Labour, informed by this head of steam and the popular belief that the establishment was holding the country, stood in the 1964 election on a manifesto which promised integrating private schools into the state sector. This never happened as the party's energies were taken up with comprehensive education, implemented by Crosland. In 1983, with a left-wing manifesto, the party again contemplated reform, but went down to a huge defeat. Now the issue is back on the agenda.

We hear about the success of Finnish education and the transformation of their state schools. But one rarely examined point by its champions is that when the Finns decided in 1963 to make their system completely comprehensive, they did so agreeing to phase out private education. This began to happen in the early 1970s and is one factor in the improvement of their school system that is now studied and referenced around the world.

I have always thought that while private education is in principle undesirable, to pose abolition is not feasible and not an ethical thing to do. It deprives people of choice and is a curtailment of freedom. Yet, such is the closed shop of privilege that is private education – that just as we abolished the closed shop in relation to trade unions – we should do so with private education.

Reform, integration, and ultimately abolition have to be put back on the agenda. This, after all, is a minority who consistently refuse to integrate, who choose to work in their own ghettos and turn their backs on mixing with people from other backgrounds, marry into their own groups, and exert power over the rest of us. This is as true of supposedly egalitarian Scotland, as Alex Massie admitted, when he wrote a defence of private education and said of the privately educated: 'they are a clan – an easily identified one at that – whose members stick, and club together... the alumni of the great private schools are a tribe apart'.

Any argument that private education is connected to intelligence, wisdom and social responsibility, can be discounted by the actions of many of the products of private education. Senior politicians such as David Cameron (Eton), George Osborne (Eton-St Paul's), Boris Johnson (Eton), or Nigel Farage (Dulwich), are hardly the brightest rising to the top. The same is true of the current Tory and Labour leaders: Theresa May (St Juliana's) and Jeremy Corbyn (Castle House).

Usually private education apologists dismiss reform by promising that private education will change with various tokenistic schemes such as bursaries for some students. Then there is the hoary old line that the state should raise the standards of its schools to that of the private sector. It would be interesting to see the *Daily Mail* reaction to the rise in taxation needed to get state schools down to a pupil to teacher ratio of 9:1.

We do need reform of state education in Scotland along with the rest of the UK, but it is also true that the continuation of private education harms all of us. It damages our society, aids various professions, and makes some walks of life no-go areas for the majority, and so consequently, distorts public debates about success and achievement. Gordonstoun advertises itself with the strapline: 'You can't put a price on friendship. Or success'. It's clear on both counts that this is disingenuous marketing.

Private schools are multi-million pound businesses – with boarding fees at Eton coming to £40,668 this year, Harrow £40,050, £12,765 at Gordonstoun and £11,600 at Fettes – yet they are enormously sensitive to even the slightest call for reform. When Matt Hancock, then UK Minister for Social Mobility, in 2016, called for employers to look at the socio-economic background of applicants, including educational background, the private education network went into overdrive. He was forced to retreat and talk in empty platitudes about the importance of meritocracy, another debauched word reduced to the opposite of its original intentions.

Six years ago, three private schools in Scotland – Fettes, St George's School for Girls, Edinburgh, and St Columba's School, Kilmacoll, Inverclyde – failed the charity test set by the Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator. Fettes had the grand total of five pupils on full subsidised places, and this could have seen their charity status revoked, but no action was forthcoming. Yet change is coming in other ways. In April 2020, most private schools in Scotland will lose charitable relief, meaning that Fettes will lose that £160,000 per annum subsidy of its non-business rates. It's a popular move supported by 73% of Scots, according to YouGov, with only 13% disagreeing.

Orwell wrote, nearly 80 years ago, about the damage these 'festering centres of snobbery' do and dared to imagine a society in which Eton, Harrow and Winchester, were no longer conveyor belts of privilege, reaction and conservatism.

Private education in the UK has in the intervening period become even more of a social blot on the landscape. The ideal that all of our children should be educated together, experiencing a similar start in life, is a powerful and liberating one which has positive consequences for all of society. We know that this is possible because it's the

experience Finland had from the 1970s onward. Like any country embarking on a bold course, they were told by vested interests that it was a diversion and wouldn't work. It *wasn't* a diversion and it *has* worked.

The UK is the only developed country with such a racket as the scale of private education and the grip it has on large swathes of society. It is time to raise the spectre of abolition and say to this minority that they have abused their privileges for too long and at too much cost to us as a society.

Scotland is making a small, but significant, step in the right direction, but we need to go much further. It's time to shut one of the last closed shops and think about all of our children together.

# From St Andrews, with alarm

Lorn Macintyre

2019

The snow has cleared from the streets of St Andrews, the storm surges subsided, at least for the time being. Soon the university polo club will be saddling up on the West Sands at what has been called 'the Northern Oxford', with students who fail to get into that august seat of learning gravitating to Andrew Lang's 'auld grey toon'.

In the overcrowded library ground floor, students, many with American accents, inquire if anyone has met the Indian billionaire's daughter, a first-year student who is reportedly occupying a mansion with a maid, butler, three housekeepers, gardener, three footmen, private chef and a chauffeur? Other stories tell of students who have flown their horses across the Atlantic and have them in stables in the environs of St Andrews.

Claiming that the university attracts the offspring of the wealthy, particularly Americans, irritates the hierarchy, though statistics show that St Andrews has fewer working-class Scottish students than similar institutions in Scotland. There are still elderly alumni who remember, with shame, working-class Scottish female students being disparaged as 'wee Marys'.

The current annual fees for undergraduates from overseas range from £21,290 for arts and sciences, to £30,080 for medicine. For overseas postgraduates (taught): £17,600 to £20,980. On top of these hefty sums, students have to find maintenance money, including flights home at vacation times. However, it appears that a significant number have no difficulty meeting these expenses, judging by the quality of the houses and flats which they rent. That is what is causing controversy and anger in St Andrews, with accusations that the university authorities, past and present, have disregarded the comfort and convenience of citizens in the relentless expansion of student numbers.

Professor Richard Olver has resided in St Andrews since 1985. He represents the Confederation of St Andrews' Residents' Associations on the St Andrews Housing Group. Writing in the latest issue of *The Saint*, the St Andrews student newspaper, Professor Olver provides depressing statistics. 'In 1985 there were 3,500 students, today there are 9,000+ and an expectation that this will rise to 10,000 in the next 3-4 years.' He points out that over the past 20 years the total population of St Andrews has hovered around 17,000, but the resident population has declined from 12,000 to 7,600. The professor concludes that 'residents are now in a minority in the town'.

More depressing statistics: Between 1979 and 2012, the number of primary school-aged children halved, and in 2007 Langlands, the largest primary school in St Andrews, closed. The university has around 5,000 students in its halls of residence, so from the 9,000+ total, 4,000 require to arrange their own accommodation. They occupy two-bed

flats, but the majority share 3-7 bed HMOs (houses in multiple occupation). There are 580 of these, and most (70%) are concentrated in the historic conservation area of St Andrews, where students account for 85% of the population. Professor Olver writes that in the historic centre, 'the resident population is now below that of the Middle Ages!' (His exclamation mark).

The professor points out: 'With few exceptions, the HMOs were once family homes and 160 of them were once council houses that entered the HMO market via the right to buy. There is an acute shortage in St Andrews, with a housing waiting list of 370 and 40 people designated homeless'. When council houses began to come on the market, individuals with cash began buying them up, with some persons acquiring several. These properties were then done up and let to students at, in some cases, exorbitant rents.

For over 30 years I have written articles and the texts of successful illustrated books, promoting St Andrews and the university's achievements, but now I view with alarm the university's failure to curtail student recruitment and to listen to the protests of the citizens. Professor Sally Mapstone, the current principal, has stated publicly that she did not wish student numbers to rise above 10,000. But considering the major problems that have been created already as a result of 9,000+, 10,000 will bring even greater problems.

In a shop I am told by an angry assistant that she has become a victim of student demand for accommodation, priced out of the flat she occupied in St Andrews, and forced to move down the coast, having to run a car on basic wages, a complaint that is repeated throughout St Andrews, which cannot any longer provide, at reasonable cost, a roof for a significant number of essential workers to service the town or start families there; a major factor in the decline of the population of St Andrews. Ironically, former council house purchases and other properties which have been made available to students, have priced those who teach them out of the town.

The university library was built in the mid-1970s for around 3,500 students. Because of the failure of previous university administrators to find the money, or authorise a fundraising campaign, the library has not been expanded to accommodate at least a satisfactory proportion of the 9,000 student body. Special collections, containing manuscripts and books essential for scholars, has been moved half a mile away, to the North Haugh. Many books have been cleared to stores (including to Dundee), to create more and more student computer space. It is no longer possible to browse shelves of certain periodicals, one of the requirements and pleasures of a traditional library. A large number of library staff is due to be decanted to a facility at the former paper mill at Guardbridge which the university acquired and is developing. Those staff workstations in the library will be replaced by more student computer points.

One consequence of the lack of space in the university library and outlier libraries is that students are now using tables in the town's cafes as workstations, their laptops and books taking up tables with four seats, so that residents, some of them elderly, standing with trays, can no longer find space to enjoy what they have purchased.

Fife Council community and housing services committee have been forced to respond to citizen protests by launching a consultation on an overprovision policy, with options of 0% and 3% limits on the further conversion of homes to HMOs, but a preference of 0%. Both the university and student bodies are bound to oppose an implemented zero policy for new HMOs, with student numbers expected to rise to 10,000. The best solution is for the university to build even more halls of residence. But can they finance them, even with overseas students' fees?

Car parking is becoming more and more difficult to find in St Andrews, and students, nervous about riding on congested streets, cycle on pavements and down wynds, though there are signs prohibiting this. The students are entitled to an education and are not responsible for the high numbers of their presence in St Andrews. It is the accountants who have pushed for expansion of student numbers to secure the future of the University of St Andrews in a competitive market, since universities have become businesses, no longer seats of learning.

But Brexit, with its potential threat to overseas student recruitment and research grants for staff, may make 10,000 students an unattainable goal, and may even lead to reduction – of staff as well as student numbers.

# What is happening to our universities?

Andrew Hook

2019

At a time when our country's greatest achievements seem to belong exclusively to the past, in one significant area of our culture we apparently still stand out: our universities. Education ministers and their spokesmen never lose an opportunity to insist that British universities are the best in the world. In what follows I shall ask how true this claim is, and go on to argue more seriously that current practices and policies will inevitably lead to a decline in the status of our university system. I shall question in turn the growing number of our universities, the model on the basis of which they are now increasingly structured and run, the problem of grade inflation, and finally the implications of the introduction of two-year degrees.

So how good are our universities? The most frequently cited league table of universities worldwide provides the following answers. We have four in the world's top 10 – Oxford (5th), Cambridge (6th), Imperial College London (8th) and University College London (10th) – and 18 in the top 100 including Edinburgh (18th), Glasgow (69th) and St Andrews (97th). Quite impressive if hardly earth-shattering. But the question I am asking concerns the future. Are the policies we are currently pursuing the right ones to maintain – never mind enhance – our positive reputation at the university level in higher education? The answer may well be no.

For centuries in the past, England got by with two universities. In the same period, Scotland had four. Today, we have at least 154 and, as we shall see, are promised many more. In the past, the system of external examining, in which faculty from one university were involved in the degree examinations of another, made it possible to argue that, say, a first class degree from Aberdeen was of equal status to one from Exeter. Few would argue that across the board the same is true today.

In fact, with the emergence in 1994 of the so-called Russell Group of 24 leading universities in teaching and research, the difference in quality and standing of institutions in the university sector was made quite clear. No doubt Russell Group institutions will continue to do well in world standings, but it is all too likely that the recent explosion in the number of universities will in the end lead to a watering down of the prestige of UK university degrees in general.

A related issue is the currently much debated one of so-called grade inflation. The concern here is over the classification of final degree examination results. When I began my own teaching career in the early 1960s, students on the basis of their results were awarded a first, second or third class degree. However, there was a growing feeling that this arrangement was less than fair to those students who had done very well, narrowing



missing a first. The answer was to divide the second class into two categories: 2/1 and 2/2. In due course, this change was made – with the assumption that the 2/2 would remain the standard mainstream award with the 2/1 being given to a relatively small body of candidates who had performed well above average. This has proved not to be the case.

Grade inflation has meant that more and more students are awarded 2/1 degrees. And that in turn has led to the 2/2 result being regarded as a disappointingly poor one. Simultaneously there has been a huge increase in the number of students being awarded first class degrees. In 2016-17, in the UK as a whole 26% of students received a first. At the University of Wolverhampton, firsts were awarded to 28% of candidates, at the University of Surrey, the figure was 41%. In that year, across all British universities, 70% of students received either a first or a 2/1. Does this really matter? I suspect that in the long-term it will undermine the level of importance given to the class of degree with which individual students graduate. Perhaps in the end classification will be abandoned.

The problems created by grade inflation, and the growing number of universities, are minor compared with the issue to which I now turn. What I have in mind is the transformation of universities as centres of higher education into versions of big businesses. It is extraordinary just how completely a neo-liberal, free-market philosophy has taken over how our universities are structured, governed and run. The business world's values in terms of how money is raised and expended now dominate. Competition is seen as the crucial driving force behind university development. We've become accustomed to hearing students described as customers. And it is true that, apart from Scottish students at Scottish universities, students across the UK pay a high price (around £9,000 a year) for the education they receive – and are encouraged to demand value for their money.

Only one aspect of this change to the university as just another free market enterprise has hit the nations' headlines: the salaries now being paid to vice-chancellors or principals. Readers will remember the outcry when it emerged a few months ago that the head of the University of Bath was being paid well over £400,000 a year. In fact, six-figure sums for the holders of such positions have become normal. Why? Because CEOs in the business world have long-earned such salaries. But the impact of the change is being felt by all those working in the university sector, including both academics and administrators.

When I began my own career in the 1960s, securing an initial appointment was the major challenge. Even for holders of doctorates, the competition to gain an appointment was intense. But that hurdle crossed, one's career path was straightforward. Lecture and teach responsibly, research and write, and begin to publish, and there was every reason to expect to build a secure career. That is no longer the case. With so many more universities there are inevitably more jobs. But it is increasingly common for appointments to be on short-term contracts. Fluctuating student numbers can determine the size of departments. An initial appointment no longer guarantees a permanent job.

Even more striking is that in the current climate a successful career is no longer built on significant research and publication.

Now it seems that all faculty members are expected to be engaged in bringing money into their university. What this means is that it is no longer the quality of one's research that matters, but whether it gains large awards from the national or international research-grant awarding bodies. If projects involve sharing grants with other major universities, so much the better. Money is what counts.

In relation to university administration, the business model has led to a substantial increase in the number of jobs in that area. Let me cite recent figures for Glasgow University which indicate that less than half of those employed by the university are engaged in teaching or research. Out of a 7,219 total of employees, only 3,060 are teachers or researchers – 42%. 2,347 – or 37% – are made up of management, professional and administrative staff. The rest are in non-academic areas.

These figures may well sound quite surprising, but I suspect that what is true of Glasgow is almost certainly true of the university sector in general. What do so many administrators do? I don't know what the answer is, but some at least seem to spend their time trying to raise money – by increasing student numbers. Given that the income of most universities is now made up of student fees, this is hardly a surprise.

In the case of the Scottish institutions, the push is above all to increase the number of overseas and postgraduate students, because they pay generously for their presence. Hence there are employees whose job it is to sell their university's attractiveness in relation to such students, emphasising the superior quality of the facilities of every kind they provide. On this basis, we are now attracting very large numbers of Chinese students – and it even seems to be the case that Chinese money, or money from overseas tax havens, is helping to pay for quality housing and other facilities. Money talks here too. But there could be a future price to pay.

My final piece of evidence that our universities are in danger of losing the lofty prestige that over centuries they have gained, concerns the latest wheeze that Westminster educationalists are busily promoting: two-year degrees. I am astonished by the general lack of astonishment at a proposal that reflects an utter failure to understand what a university education is about. What it is not about is churning out quickie degrees so that students can pick up better paid jobs sooner than their less fortunate peers. Yet that is the basic argument advanced by those who support this absurd idea.

The generally unrecognised truth is that even the current three-year honours degree in English universities is something of an anomaly: in worldwide terms, a version of the Scottish four-year honours degree structure is far more common. (The three-year version no doubt reflects a belief in the superiority of English A levels – whether that superiority remains in place is an open question.) But the really damaging aspect of the two-year degree plan is the assumption that students choose to go to university because they believe a degree will get them a well-paid job.

In all my almost 40 years of university teaching I never met a student who mentioned money as the reason for their presence. I accept that taking courses and passing exams – which leads to a degree – is at the heart of the university experience. But it is about a great deal more. It's about growing up, becoming independent, meeting and getting to know new people, widening one's experience in all kinds of different ways. And above all it's about the opportunity to share in the world of knowledge and learning that universities have studied and promoted over long centuries.

Today, the so-called STEM subjects are widely seen as more worthy of study – and perhaps in economic terms they are. But to suggest that the study of philosophy, history, literature, the arts, and the social sciences should be limited or denied in a university makes no sense whatsoever.

Back in 1605, Bacon announced he had taken all knowledge to be his province. If UK universities wish to lose such worldwide status as they presently retain, the road to follow is to abandon the study of the humanities – and, as a handful have done, start offering two-year degrees.

# Teachers make readers – and enhance lives

David McVey

2019

Recently I read – re-read – Maxim Gorky's *My Childhood* (Penguin). It's a powerful and mesmerising account of boyhood, poverty and brutality in Tsarist Russia. Not a feel-good read, then: I suspect it's one of the volumes P G Wodehouse had in mind whenever he mentioned grim tragedies of Russian peasant life where, say, grandfather hangs himself in the barn during a wedding.

I say 're-read'; I last encountered the book in, I think, 1973, in an earlier Penguin edition, when we studied it in English class. Several of the incidents and images and sensations in the book – the frogs falling to their doom when the father's grave is being infilled, the vinegary smell of printing inks from grandfather – I remembered from 40-odd years before. But what really struck me was the sheer *ambition* of my school and my teachers in setting such a challenging work for a class of second years (mostly 12 or 13 years old). Clearly, they had no sense that they wanted to keep things easy for this group of working-class west of Scotland youngsters. No need to keep what they study 'relevant'. Aim high. Test them, *stretch* them.

I didn't see it like that at the time, so this piece is partly my overdue, apologetic thank you note to my teachers. I didn't really appreciate what you gave to me at the time, but I value it immeasurably now.

Not every full-length prose work we were set was as unlikely as Gorky's. *No Picnic on Mount Kenya* by Felice Benuzzi went down very well, especially with the boys in the class. In the early 1970s we were still very much a post-war generation, brought up on stiff-upper-lipped war films and comics that celebrated and remembranced the Second World War. Benuzzi's true tale of escaping from a British POW camp in Kenya with two other mountaineers, attempting to climb the eponymous peak, and then reporting back to the camp in states of extreme exhaustion ticked so many boxes: war, escape, pursuit, adventure. How could it fail? It's another book that I've re-read in recent years.

In pursuit of 'relevance', we were introduced to the English working-class literature of the kitchen sink era. *Joby* and *A Kind of Loving* by Stan Barstow were set in worlds we recognised. Though from an earlier era, *Sons and Lovers* communicated a lot to us; if we weren't in Nottinghamshire we were all the same in a former coal-mining town. I especially loved Keith Waterhouse's *Billy Liar*. I re-read it often and have worn out two copies now. Recently, I was reading Alan Sillitoe's short story collection *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* when I was struck by a passage on the first page of the story *The Disgrace of Jim Scarfedale*. The schoolboy narrator tells us:

*Instead of doing arithmetic lessons at school I glue my eyes to the atlas under my desk, planning the way I'm going to take when the time comes (with the ripped-out map folded-up in my back pocket); bike to Derby, bus to Manchester, train to Glasgow, nicked car to Edinburgh and hitch-hiking down to London.*

We'd studied the story in school, 30-odd years earlier. That wonderfully rhythmic escape route was memorable in itself but it had been refreshing to read about a working-class character not unlike ourselves who wasn't above nicking stuff. As they were intended to, these works stirred a taste for more in the same genre.

Of the poetry I remember being introduced to, Edwin Morgan's *In the Snack-bar* stands out. He was one of our Glaswegian own, after all, and the percussive opening lines instantly paint a scene recognisable to anyone who drank bad coffee in a cheap Scottish café in the 1960s or 70s:

*A cup capsizes along the formica,  
slithering with a dull clatter.*

Wole Soyinka's *Telephone Conversation*, with its funny but telling story of an African trying to rent accommodation from a casually racist landlady ('Are you light or very dark?') also sticks in the memory. I developed a taste for poetry though some of the works we studied – Lawrence's *Bavarian Gentians* and *Snake*, for example – rather left me cold at the time. But I still remembered some of the images and phrases when I revisited the poems decades later.

We covered surprisingly little Dickens – just *A Christmas Carol* and *Oliver Twist* – but enough to whet my appetite so that I'd eventually read my way through the canon. However, I recall studying and reading at least five Shakespeare plays. I have been horrified to read of teaching approaches which avoid Shakespeare because his work isn't 'relevant' and 'has nothing to say' to young people from certain backgrounds.

Our teachers worked hard to recommend the Bard to us, ordinary working-class Kirkintilloch scallywags that we were, and if I learned anything it's that the person to whom Shakespeare has nothing to say hasn't been born. I see being introduced to Shakespeare as a right; if the pupil subsequently decides it's not for him or her, that they'd rather watch *Made in Chelsea*, fair enough. But the offer must be made, the opportunity given.

I was almost in tears on a recent visit to the birthplace in Stratford when one of the performers in the gardens delivered the 'All the world's a stage...' speech to an audience mostly made up of primary school children. At first they were sceptical, but her masterly delivery began to get through to them (they were delighted to learn that 'puking' was a Shakespearian word) and by the end they were captured.

After reading *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in school, we were taken to see a touring production at the King's Theatre in Glasgow. Titania was played by Linda Thorson,

whom we knew as Tara King from *The Avengers*. They had hooked us anyway with the prospect of a real live Avenger on stage, but I was captivated by the whole experience; the immediacy of theatre (more like being at a football match, I always think, than watching a film), the imaginative staging, the light and colour and, of course, the magic of the language. Shakespeare, I learned, was something to read *and* something to watch. We learned Puck's 'I am that merry wanderer of the night' speech and I have it word-perfect still. Rote-learning has a bad name, but it's not all bad.

*Hamlet* I loved, though it didn't lead to a theatre trip: instead, we were shown Tony Richardson's stagey 1969 film, shot entirely in London's Roundhouse. It featured Nicol Williamson as the Dane, with a stunning cast that included Anthony Hopkins as an oddly young Claudius and Gordon Jackson as an oddly elderly Horatio. However, we did read a lot of work by other dramatists; Harley Granville-Barker's *The Voysey Inheritance* and Ibsen's *The Wild Duck* didn't do much for me, but Priestley's *An Inspector Calls* was a favourite. I suppose it appealed to the Old Labour values most of us were imbibing at home.

I remember being disappointed 20 or so years ago by a West End revival of the play, but David Thewlis's brilliant performance as Inspector Goole in the 2015 BBC version re-awakened all the excitement and anger I remember arising from our reading of the play. Back in 1982, the BBC had produced another fine version with Bernard Hepton excellent as Goole.

We only studied the original novel of *Billy Liar* not the play, but we were taken to see a production anyway. I found it disappointing – too much was lost from the book – but the 1963 film, directed by John Schlesinger and featuring Tom Courtenay and a rock solid company of British character actors, is a glorious joy, the equal of the book. I return to the DVD as often as I return to my current weary-looking copy of the novel.

I hope Ray Bradbury's short story *A Sound of Thunder* is still read in schools. It had everything, *everything*, a teenage Scottish lad in the 1970s could want: dinosaurs, shooting, time travel and cool American dialogue. For all its imaginative exoticism, the story is more relevant than ever; surely, during the 2016 US Presidential Election, someone, somewhere, travelled back to the era of the dinosaurs and trod on a prehistoric moth? *An Outpost of Progress* by Conrad is another challenging short story that our teachers set for us. I also enjoyed *The Wireless Set* by George Mackay Brown and it gave me a lifelong love of the writing of Orkney's word-magician.

Which brings me to a criticism I would make of my experience of English at school; besides some Mackay Brown short stories, the Morgan poem and a bit of Burns, I don't recall any other Scottish literature being showcased. No Scott, no Stevenson, no Buchan, no Spark. And mention of Muriel Spark raises another issue you'll have noticed; our mostly female teachers didn't highlight much work by female writers. In their defence, by hooking us on literature, by feeding our curiosity, they had given us the motivation and the skills to seek it out for ourselves.

So, Mrs Connell, Mrs Glascodine, Mr Keys, Mr McLanachan, Miss Currie, Mrs Pitcairn and any others I've forgotten, if you're still around, thank you for making us read, forcing us into literature, taking us to the theatre and for assuming that, unpromising material as we were, we could cope with challenging works that stretched our understanding. By sparking my reading addiction, you have enriched my life in ways, and to an extent you could not possibly imagine.

And if you are an English teacher today; I know that you're constrained by targets and curricula and management. But don't be afraid to stretch your pupils. Challenge them, enthuse them about reading, but don't just go for easy, short, supposedly-relevant 'texts'. Some pupils you'll hook, and even if they never pass another exam, you'll give them something much more, something genuinely priceless. Teachers make readers, and enhance lives.

LANGUAGE



# All passion spent

Ian Mackenzie

1998

Laugh? Till I cried. Jim Armour was a rangy Canadian with a grin like the Grand Canyon, and for the sake of my room-mate and myself at the beginning of our first term, he was doing his famous lampoon of a J S Stewart sermon. Lampoon is too lily-livered a word. He was sending Professor Stewart up through the stratosphere. The theatrical delivery of the real Stewart, regarded by many in his day as the greatest preacher in Scotland, took enthusiasm a good deal further than was expected of your average Kirk preacher, so it required only a minor ratching up for Jim to produce a performance of sustained hysteria.

Jamie Stewart – as we called him to convince ourselves he was human – bred many impersonators, but the Armour rendering was definitive, because he was a natural comic, in command of his technique, and so accurate in theology as in style that the performance constantly trembled on the lip of blasphemy. When the final peroration burst into flames, its inspirational screams echoing through the New College Residence, every door was opened and no space on the corridor floor remained unrolled upon. I was inchoate with hilarity mixed with discomfort. Some hidden part of my soul was registering unease.

J S Stewart could take care of himself; as one of our professors he had the power to fail us in endow terms exams. But the vulnerable Galilean figure whose name Jim was taking in vain with such gusto? To be honest (though in such sophisticated company, I'd no intention of being) I was shocked.

The psychological profile of my room-mate was entirely contrary to Jim's which is probably why they became friends. David was a brilliant American from Yale, steeped in literature and on a bad day (one in every two) engulfed in gloom. He had a tight mouth, beady eyes and a forehead to match Salisbury Crags. I owe to him my subsequent decision to become a minister (I was a music student at the time) because I thought if anyone can feel *this* bad about becoming a Christian maybe I should take it seriously.

Professor Tom Torrance, himself no slouch in the business of being serious, once told me David had the most acute sense of sin he'd ever met in a student. And yet it was this walking silo of intensity who most conspicuously split his sides at Jim Armour's blasphemous burlesques. When he had recovered, he would say to me: 'Jim does J S Stewart better than J S Stewart does'. To which my private mental response was 'Is it the preacher's job to do Jesus better?'

Over my years at New College, I gradually became hardened to the ways of theological students, but never did I stop feeling myself exposed in a hall of mirrors. That's where I

still am; but I think I now understand that this is where the preacher has to be: in a sense as profound as it is devious, the truth that I now embrace is that ambiguity is all. Ambiguity may be bad for your health, but the alternative – striving for logical clarity about ultimate things, aiming for ideological totalitarianism – can be bad for the health of others. Because, whatever the idea of God is about, it is not transparent to the logical systems which are the product of human brains. If we word God signifies anything, it's something outside our logic, interrupting our loops of rational discourse. Oh great! So how do we think or talk (both activities being functions of our brains) about this that is beyond our brains? By using language that is outside logic; in other words, by being beside ourselves. Which is exactly what J S Stewart and his Canadian lampooner so brilliantly were. And isn't that what St Paul advised Christians to be: idiots for Christ's sake?

The imprimatur of Paul may not be regarded by everyone as the best recommendation for rational advice, but then rationality was not what he was selling. Paul was a paradox on legs. But – could he spin words! Despite its candy-floss overuse at weddings (and the Prime Minister's over-finessed reading at Diana's funeral), first Corinthians 13 is a subversive piece of enhanced paradoxical language.

Such enhancement does not originate in logic. On the other hand, it is a common mistake to assume that people deploying rhetoric do so because they're so weak in logical argument that they use high flown language in compensation: 'When in doubt, shout'. To see how simplistic that is, you've only to read Paul's letter to the Romans and trace there not the ravings of a mystic but the forensic skill of a school dialectician. The same J S Stewart, whose honeyed voice and vaulting images could reduce a huge throng to rapt silence, could use explain language when teaching; indeed, the first theology I ever imbibed was at the age of 10 reading some Boys' Brigade Bible study material by Stewart of such ungarnished clarity that I can recall parts of it now.

But what did this clear presentation leave me with? A picture of history – salvation history, if you like, but still history. It gave me no living sense of spiritual experience. Any burgeoning sense of God came from my father's prayers and sermons. The intellectual content of the sermons was usually above my head, but the depth of his feeling of which I was umbilically aware midwifed his metaphors into my mind. So when, high in the pulpit, white-faced and intense (actually with advanced heart disease), he said the soul was an ocean we were given a lifetime to cross, I took it on board as referring to something real, specially in a winter storm with the North Sea pounding the Fraserburgh harbour wall, just behind the pulpit. This is preaching. The totality of the experience is more than the sum of the parts of the language. Or, as I prefer to understand it, the whole environment is the language. It is obvious that organ music is not notes on a page. But equally, it is not just the sounds coming from the pipes. Organ music is the total effect of the organ sounds resounding in the building which houses it. Similarly, pulpit language is what resonates in the full theatricality of worship; and that includes, of course, the

psychic interactivity between the pulpit and the people, and the whole hinterland of the people. Harry Whitley of St Giles uncannily understood that.

In that sense, preaching and praying (in the Scottish and Nonconformist traditions these are sometimes hard to distinguish) require the co-operation of the congregation. Just as much as in the theatre or the cinema, a certain suspension of disbelief is required. Walking into a cinema involves a ritual. Going through the popcorn, advertisement and trailer stages leads up to the final lowering of lights. At this point, the audience focuses its mind on the film it came to see and unconsciously adjusts its brains to the conventions of filmmaking. So a well-ordered church service will prepare the people to open their minds to the peculiar language and thought-forms of the sermon.

There are all sorts of caveats, of course. A bad film will lose its audience sooner or later. Sooner, on a Friday or Saturday night, when the responsive language from a teenage audience may become more creative than the film. Even a desultory afternoon cinema audience may signal ennui by an escalating crescendo of senior citizens rustling sweetie papers. A bad sermon is not immune from losing its congregation, but even though church convention still inhibits loud ribaldry, theological heckling, or walking out for a fag or the loo, you sense the attention slipping, the thoughts of the people creeping away into the nooks and crannies of haunted memories, or current money worries, or the existential business of adjusting the posterior to alleviate lumbar pain. On the other hand, the fact that bad sermons proliferate isn't remarkable. Just think how much bad TV you've watched recently; any student can tell you how much bad lecturing there is; and to hear current Westminster debate is to weep for the days of Gladstone and Disraeli, Lloyd George, Churchill, Bevan, Iain Macleod. But I hear your objection. I'm talking about presentation, not truth. Might I not as well be a spin-doctor? Well, isn't that what a preacher is – a propagandist?

I began my career in religious broadcasting as religious adviser to one of the main UK ITV companies. One of my first assignments was to a series in which highly intelligent but educationally 'subnormal' young teenagers improvised with wit and passion scenes from the New Testament. Making fast assessments of the production staff, they called me 'God's conman'. I remembered this when, after preaching my heart out (and I hope my mind too) in a Peterhead parish for five years, I went back into religious broadcasting in the BBC and found myself filming in the wilds of Sutherland. Our gifted young cameraman was Andrew Dunn. Over the smoked haddock soufflé one evening at the Forsinard Hotel, he explained that while it was his job to find exactly the right shot, it was the director's or producer's job to 'con him' into a state of mind out of which his perception of the right shot would emerge.

For cameraman read layman and for producer read preacher. It is the job of laymen and laywomen to get things right in the secular world. It's the preacher's job to open windows onto a different world which may illumine, enhance, or sometimes even alter the perspectives out of which arise the layperson's attitudes and decisions. If this is

conning, let's con on; it was Martin Luther who wrote: 'The first duty of the preacher is to entertain'. I think it is a reasonable interpretation of that to see the preacher's task, as that of any entertainer, to create a kind of magic which alters the mindset of audience or congregation. But what stops this being brainwashing? Ah, now we come to the nub of the matter.

In the sense in which art is entertainment, so is the preaching process. But what about the sense in which art is truth? Well, was it fair do's for Jesus, as reported in the Gospel narrative, to dodge the question of what truth is? It was rather a habit of his, actually. The text so often has him dodging the logical interlocution of lawyers by telling ambiguous stories or lobbing back paradoxical questions. It is probably too much to hope that Jesus was as funny as Eddie Izzard, but his crowd-pulling tangential teasing of the kind of intellectual chess systemised by the scribes as truth is the very stuff of divine comedy.

Oh, so it's Jesus the joker, eh? Er, no. I'm not saying what He is. It is the doctrinal reflex of the scribe to want to do that. I'm only reading the Bible and noting what I note. You may put him in a box. I daren't. What about the heavy stuff, then, the Passion narratives? For what it's worth, I don't find the Passion stories sliding into heavy melodrama, though much ghastly preaching, specially in Holy Week, tries to drag them there. Whether credit should go to the Gospel writers or to real life, the Gospel drama is taut, the dialogue is crisp, the script has balance. To me, it's more Mozart than Puccini. Its painful moments are credible because of the swift-footed flow of the story leading up to the end-game. In our Scottish tradition, preaching, and worship centred around preaching, depends on an analogous dramatic flow.

I believe, though I wasn't there, that in the pre-20th-century Kirk there existed that genuine tradition of preaching as entertainment. Not light, not facile, not ethically trite, not vulgar, not patronising, not abstractly doctrinal, not simplistic entertainment, but vivid narrative, colourful description, sardonic humour, hard images, elegiac poetry, pastoral tenderness, cathartic grief, riveting challenge, and hours and hours of relentless preparatory work! This was real show business in an age which had no TV or cinema and little accessible theatre. This was theatre in the round, stretching some of the nation's finest minds and most creative performing talents.

So what happened? That's easy. The passion went. I can't tell you when exactly, but it's gone, its final comet tail vanishing around the 1970s. I don't mean the passion of faith, the passion of devotion, the passion for a Christian life, the passion for a pastoral vocation. I know all *that* is still around. The thing that has ebbed away is the passion for words. There again, I don't doubt the commitment of men and women ministers to get up there into the pulpit and pass on a message. But after decades of going round churches in my broadcasting role, I know that what is no longer there is a passionate belief in preaching as an art, a craft, a skill, a showbiz mastery of technique.

Aha! I caught you – you were slipping into a judgement that I was slipping into triviality. And that's the problem. In an age of managerial prioritisation, how can any

sensible managerial minister put theatrical performance techniques at the top of a list including organising the church and community, managing budgets and flow charts, having a leadership profile in community issues, making an input to the national church through Presbytery and Assembly committees, let alone the fundamental job of pastoral care for the young, the old, the sick... and now the extra chore of checking carefully that one is not beating up one's spouse in the manse?

And the theological colleges connive at this managerial practicality; understandably, as their own survival depends on strict faculty managerial prioritisation. Mission statements are no longer calls to Africa, but to enhancement of the departmental publication ratio.

Now, all this may be where we should be. Perhaps the age of verbal preaching should be over. But in that case, what are our church services for? If there are no performers left, why keep the theatres open? Many community churches already follow this logic, and give the pulpit (if any) a marginal function in the liturgy. It has to be said that in these circumstances enhancement of language doesn't often seem much of a priority either. Simplicity and clarity are the aims. But simplicity can become banality and clarity can become as inspiring as a council tax reminder. In that case, the heights and depths, the ambiguities and imaginative leaps, the colour and poetry, wit and paradox, tenderness and tragedy, comedy and wild hope of the Greatest Story ever told – all that has to be handed over lock, stock and barrel to other wordsmiths: the film-makers, dramatists, novelists, essayists, actors, poets and comedians of our time, the mysterious suffering celebrating entertainers who are not too busy or too proud to help us transcend the daily grind by laughing and crying.

At the beginning, I recalled asking the question long ago: 'Is it the preacher's job to be more Jesus than Jesus?' The answer is no, of course. All one can be is oneself (though that seems complicated enough). But if the story leading up to Jesus, and gathering around him, and evolving in the two millennia since, is still regarded as interesting enough to maintain churches and pulpits, then the art of preaching, like any art, requires the giving of all of oneself. Whatever the style of language: comic, tragic, lyrical, reflective, ironic, philosophical, dynamic, dialectical, plain spoken, or mystical, it needs one's entire energy, skill and courage – and time! Preaching is worth living and dying for; and many have lived and died for the freedom to do it. Here's a challenge. If our Scottish poets and wordsmiths do not find sufficient expression in the Parliament of the Holy Rood (and oh that they would), let them throng into the pulpits of our land, and tell it as it is.

# Government by soundbite

Alan Thompson

1998

In a famous parliamentary exchange, Gladstone accused Disraeli of not knowing the difference between a misfortune and a catastrophe. Disraeli denied the charge. 'If Mr Gladstone fell in the Thames,' he explained, 'it would be a misfortune. If somebody pulled him out, it would be a catastrophe'.

The linguistic style of the House of Commons at that time was an almost theatrical play on language (some of Disraeli's quips could have been written by Oscar Wilde), of gentlemen talking wittily and cogently to each other. There was a concern with the exact meanings of words and definitions, and indulgence in the Victorian love of puns.

Compared with the exchange of schoolboy insults of a later date, this linguistic style might appear elitist and mannered. It was, however, in debating terms often highly effective: it could sway the final vote (although this, of course, was a product of looser party discipline) and it kept the House of Commons as the main arena of political activity in the country. Detailed press reporting of debates played its part in maintaining the pre-eminence of parliament.

This 19th-century debating style would be unusual today. More than three decades ago, when I was first an MP, it would still have been possible.

Harold Macmillan, the then Prime Minister, had many Victorian characteristics: elegance of dress and manner, a slightly languid delivery (which concealed a sharp and adroit mind) and a highly entertaining wit. He had, after all, been a first-class honours graduate of Oxford, but he concealed this background very cleverly behind the manner of a slightly distraught country gentleman. This endeared him to the Conservative Party of the day (in contrast to R A Butler who paraded his intellect and was hence considered by many Tory MPs to be 'too clever by half').

In discussing the linguistic style of earlier parliaments, one cannot overlook Sir Alec Douglas-Home – a greatly underrated politician – who succeeded Macmillan as Prime Minister. His quiet, humorous authority at Question Time got the Tory Party over a number of awkward hurdles. In the field of foreign policy, he was highly respected by Labour leaders like Gaitskell and Attlee, but his debating style was too recondite to suit the media and the country at large. In a sense, Douglas-Home was the last of the Victorians – encyclopedic in their knowledge, full of apposite literary and historical quotations, and masters of the put-down and the aside. His aloofness could be a strength in the House but a weakness in the country at large. It is difficult to imagine Douglas-Home as a Prime Minister in 1998.

Macmillan's style and wit, however, brought out the best in the Opposition – not just

its front bench, which was dominated by the formidably intellectual Mr Gaitskell, but among backbenchers. There was always a place in the Labour Party for mavericks (who sometimes caused more consternation to the government than their official leaders by their unexpected ambushes).

Aneurin Bevan was in this category until he became an official Opposition spokesman. I also vividly remember Emrys Hughes (a stylistic predecessor of Dennis Skinner) who was a regular attender of the House in his seat below the gangway. Gaitskell sometimes became impatient with him. 'I wish,' he once said to me, 'that Emrys would stop going on so much about being Keir Hardie's son-in-law'. These parliamentary sharpshooters sat in their regular places rather like honorary privy councillors, and their fusillades greatly enlivened the proceedings of the House. On one occasion, when Macmillan had gone on a visit to India, Hughes asked his deputy, R A Butler: 'When is the Prime Minister due back from India, and why?'

At a later date, Tam Dalyell became a formidable 'unofficial' backbencher. There is a lingering heritage of Victorian style, wit and eloquence in Dalyell's delivery. In the 1983-87 parliament, his pursuit of the government on a number of issues, especially the sinking of the Argentine battleship *General Belgrano* during the Falklands conflict, demonstrated the way in which an Opposition member could use parliamentary procedure to upset the occupants of the Treasury bench, not least the formidable Mrs Thatcher who treated Dalyell's forays with more respect (albeit unwillingly) than she treated General Galtieri.

The part which Dalyell played in influencing the early devolution legislation is another example of his persistence and effective debating style. It is doubtful whether individual backbenchers today can influence legislation so effectively, but the possibility remains.

When we discuss language and communication in politics, we must remember that, from the government's point of view, they are largely about power. They are concerned with the strengthening of support: popular support, parliamentary support and the support of powerful interest groups like business, trade unions and professional bodies.

In recent years, Prime Ministers and party leaders have increased their efforts to appeal directly to the public, particularly through television and radio. It is difficult to realise that for almost the first half of this century political leaders were unknown in any personal sense to the majority of the electorate. We are now used to seeing politicians on television several times a week, and their personal characteristics have become much more familiar to the people at large.

Another considerable change affecting linguistic style has been the enormous growth of popular newspapers based on 'entertainment' values rather than staid political commentaries. The changing role of the press during this century has had a profound influence on the language of politics.

The origins of modern mass-circulation papers owe much to a group of early buccaneers, including such men as Harmsworth who founded the *Daily Mail* at the end of the last century.

Harmsworth's characteristics were energy and ambition. Quite early, he conceived a parallel between himself and Napoleon, to whom he bore some physical resemblance. He thirsted to conquer. But unlike his prototype, he had no cultural uses for conquest, nor anything that in the higher sense might be called an ideal. The lack of one prevented him from becoming a revolutionary in politics or even a Liberal. But he was not really a Conservative either. It was his instinct to shout with the largest crowd. But he had no sentimental feeling for the greatness of the country's past and the continuity of her institutions.

His papers bore the stamp of their uneducated founder. 'Written by office-boys for office-boys' was Lord Salisbury's famous gibe. But the public which liked them was extremely wide and by no means all poor. The business class, which had become so important in England, comprised enormous numbers of men who had not had even a secondary education. Outside the matters in which they made their money, they had the minds of children. Existing newspapers ignored their naive tastes, while assuming an amount of critical intelligence which they simply did not possess.

The downgrading of political stories by the popular press still remains an obstacle in creating a politically literate electorate. As General Elections approach, the popular newspapers tend to show their party colours more explicitly. We must remember, however, that historically it is surprising how often the newspaper barons, with their massive circulations, have failed in various vendettas against the government of the day, or failed to carry a cause they were espousing.

A phenomenon of recent years has been declining attendance by MPs at the House (although this is subject to wide fluctuation). This cannot, however, be wholly attributed to declining standards and increasing boredom of parliamentary oratory.

One reason is probably the growth in demands made on members by constituents, interest groups and others. There is little doubt that the general constituency caseload of members has grown considerably, while constituency parties have become much more anxious to monitor their member's activities. It has been suggested that the changing nature of members has meant that there are fewer, on either side of the House, who are content simply to make up an audience. Such are the pressures on the time of members that many feel disinclined to attend a debate merely to listen (unless to a speaker of unusual ability or on an occasion of outstanding interest).

Regular attendance may have declined because the quality of speaking is less compelling and there are simply fewer stars to draw in the crowds. Probably there are fewer members whose very name has the magic to draw an audience. However, great orators may be more recognisable in retrospect. It may also be that the new style of political language, which stresses the ability to communicate via the television screen with the public in their own homes, requires different techniques than those valued on the floor of the House. The fact remains that some MPs value four minutes on their regional television more highly than the opportunity to speak in the House.



Two other factors are perhaps closer to the heart of the matter. The first is that much of what takes place in the House is not seen as being of great importance. According to this argument, the decline of Britain as a great power and the sense that decisions in domestic politics are taken elsewhere have meant that many debates are less significant. This point was made by John Mackintosh in 1978 when he suggested that there had been a decline in the quality of front-bench performers due in part to the fact that: 'Britain is no longer a world power, the House of Commons spends very little time on crucial world events, and more and more debates are about boring and detailed problems of economic policy'. A similar point was made by Francis Pym when he argued that 'with the reduction in the international influence of Britain, the Commons has dealt far less often with wider issues of major significance and far more with trivial matters'. My recollection of the House is that foreign and commonwealth affairs were constantly being discussed in detail. Against this must be set increasing controversy over the EC which now takes place.

Secondly, much of what takes place in the Chamber is predetermined in its outcome. This is discouraging to members (particularly new MPs) but it seems inevitable with the complexities of modern government.

It is too early in the present parliament to say what characteristics will emerge. It could be argued that we are still in the government's honeymoon period with a strong and popular Prime Minister and a massive majority behind him. The size of this majority at present works in the government's favour, but its very size always involves the danger of backbenchers feeling free to criticise their own government and to make these criticisms articulate in the press and television (which always have a sneaking admiration for colourful rebels).

The government's aim is, of course, to get to the media first with snappy, popular, linguistically simple slogans and explanations. Hence the rise of the 'soundbite' – a catchy phrase without undue elaboration. The media love 'soundbites' – it makes their work of interpretation easier. They are like magpies going for a statement that glints in the sun, something that sparkles amidst all the verbiage of party controversy.

Whoever is to blame for the rise of the soundbite (whether politicians, the media or the public) it is clearly here to stay and is part of the political linguistics of the future. And we must remember that leading politicians of the past – Lloyd George, Winston Churchill, Harold Macmillan and Harold Wilson, for example – never underestimated the use of the soundbite. It was merely that they used it within the wider context of parliamentary and public oratory on the issues of the day.

My own hope is that the inevitable rise of the soundbite will be contained within reasoned debate and discussion. To be fair to television, it puts out a number of programmes which makes this possible. I am therefore still optimistic about the basic strengths of the British (and, soon, the Scottish) democratic procedures, although there are too many pressures operating (from the public, from parliament and from television) to bring about any renaissance of linguistic style.

There is one area, however, where I believe we can keep alive some of the linguistic qualities of our heritage. This is in strong public support for the arts. To those who argue against Arts Council grants on the ground that the theatre is a minority interest, I suggest that subsidies to the theatre have considerable effects beyond immediate attendance figures. British film and television gain enormously (both culturally and financially) from drawing upon a reservoir of accomplished actors trained in the theatre. Television (although it does not always realise it) needs actors with charisma, intelligence and self-discipline. The fact that many were brought up on Shakespeare does not inhibit the range and variety of their talents. By benefiting television, support for the arts benefits the public and ultimately the quality of political and public debate.

The establishment of Scotland's parliament will bring the debate about standards of political literacy and style nearer home. It will certainly bring politicians into closer contact with a distinctively Scottish media. The popular press will no doubt remain wedded to 'soundbite' politics and an emphasis on entertainment and sport. The main challenge will lie with television and radio and the 'quality' press to educate as well as inform the Scottish electorate.

As for the politicians, they will also have the task of educating the public, as well as leading and responding to it. This is almost as much a question of style and language as of political policy-making. Scotland's educational and cultural heritage is a considerable one. Many new parliaments in the world have come into existence without such a rich and diversified experience. The tasks facing MSPs should be well within their capabilities and aspirations.

# As she is spoke

Rose Galt

2008

Do you lose sleep at night worrying about 'fused participles'? I ask because a recent contributor to *The Guardian's* readers' editor was agitated to the point of mania over that paper's use of one. To put you out of your misery: in the following sentence 'the boy's parents disapproved of him using a mobile phone' the word 'him' is a 'fused participle.' The correct usage is 'his'. The paper rightly refused to grovel in apology on the grounds that all languages change and develop and that the 'correct' form had virtually died out. Nevertheless there are some things happening to our language that ought to be resisted.

What follows isn't an old fogey rant against dialect and slang. I love the dialectal difference which means that I once dropped my car keys in Glasgow down 'a stank', but had I done so in Aberdeen it would have been 'a cundy'. Slang can be colourful, humorous and evocative as well as pertinent to its times. Think 'scoobie doo' for 'clue' or 'desmond' for a 2/2 honours degree. No, I'm talking about the laziness or ignorance or indifference which can lead to words being used wrongly or useful distinctions being blurred.

Some pairs of words demand a choice and many go wrong. There's 'imply' and 'infer', 'flout' and 'flaunt', 'deny' and 'refute' and 'uninterested' and 'disinterested'. There are eight meanings in there and it is to treat the language of Shakespeare and Milton with contempt to elide the differences between each pair. I keep my most potent fury for the now rampant 'fewer' and 'more' confusion. I find it difficult to believe that you need a degree in linguistics to learn that if you can count things you use 'fewer', if you can't you use 'less'. So 'fewer flowers' but 'less flour'. My brother has claimed that I visit him in Edinburgh only to go to Waitrose whose checkouts correctly say 'Five items or Fewer'. Not quite, but let's all beware lest the only communication left to us is 'CU 2morrow@X'.

# No word for happy

Fiona MacDonald

2008

As my friend's daughter has turned – overnight, it seems – from a schoolgirl into a willowy beauty, her interest in our conversations about Scots words has decreased from mild to almost non-existent. Deep in the Cheshire countryside we used to entertain ourselves occasionally with a lexicon of words like lum, breeks, skelf, cuddie, stookie, ashet, stravaiging and, of course, dreich. I don't really remember how this started. Possibly, because she is half-Scottish – a fact which interests her not at all – I felt it my duty to pass on some of these words to her. It's not that I ever expected her to use – or even remember – them. I don't use many of them myself. My only ambition for her in that respect was that she would grow up pronouncing the word 'loch' correctly. Nonetheless, I would work my way through the list while she tolerated my quaintness with mild amusement.

Her interests are more sophisticated nowadays but when I saw her last weekend, she asked me the question she always has for me: have I thought of a Scots word for 'happy' yet? The origin of this standing joke is that one day, as I recited words like scunner, thrawn, gomerel, dour, glaikit, sleekit, galoot, crabbit, I suddenly realised that I was on a very negative seam. Trying to lift the tone of the conversation, I searched my mind for a word for 'happy', but could come up with nothing.

Last weekend, she challenged me yet again. Her mother and I, deciding that something obvious must be eluding us, went online to search a Scots dictionary. The nearest we could come up with was 'cantie' but this is a word I have never in my life heard in conversation and, anyway, it means cheerful rather than happy.

It seems there is no Scots word for happy and therefore I must conclude that, as I have long suspected, we are a right miserable bunch.

# Mind your language

R D Kernohan

2009

I was pleased to read that the South African athlete Caster Semenya returned home to 'a heroine's welcome' after her victory in the World Athletics Championships. There were even some bold journalists who, when covering the controversy afflicting her, wrote about the problems of defining sex and did not call it by the grammatical expression 'gender'.

If Miss or Ms Semenya had distinguished herself in other circumstances I fear (going by what I read in the papers) that she would have been hailed as a hero, in line with the fashion which often insists that eminent actresses should be called actors, to the annoyance of linguistic conservatives like myself. But even I would never call Jane Austen an authoress or Elizabeth Barrett Browning a poetess.

Language is always changing and experimenting, and not just at the texting-level of 'ILUVU2'. It's hard to judge which fashionable usages will fade away and which will join thousands of earlier innovations as standard English. Such judgements are especially difficult when our language is coping not only with new media and changing technologies but with becoming the world's *lingua franca*. There is even some loss of confidence in the very idea of standard English, sometimes confused with pedantry or 'received pronunciation'. There are also additional dilemmas caused by pressures to flaunt the once unmentionable or unprintable.

It's tempting to blame the media for the less agreeable linguistic changes, but their responsibility is limited. Certainly *The Sun* is guilty of debauching the cheerful verb 'to romp', and papers persist in the ugly journalese of 'joy-riders' and 'killing-sprees'. Some even think that the Forth and Clyde flow into estuaries and not their ancient firths. Media people may reject good American like the past-participle 'gotten' and the preference for 'the fall' over autumn, but they pick up bad American like 'to talk with at this time' and the rather Germanic meanings now imposed on hopefully and problematic. They have also imported the difficulty I encountered in America of not knowing from a heading whether a story about vets dealt with old soldiers or animal-doctors.

But, while the media start some trends and encourage others, they are often carried along by linguistic forces beyond their control. They were initially reluctant to sacrifice the light-hearted meaning of gay, and newspapers have lagged honourably behind much artistic practice and social conversation in the use of the coarseness which the BBC calls 'strong language'. Most of them still seem ready to fight a rearguard action with asterisks.

Even Ms – which in broadcasting is virtually indistinguishable from Miss – has been

forced on the media by its wider use. The same is true of partner, for its use as a synonym for lover is increasingly forcing journalists to avoid embarrassing ambiguity by writing of business partners, an expression which may soon be hyphenated or rendered in one word as businessman sometimes is. (And am I wrong when I sometimes now read 'businessman' in Scottish news reports to mean shady trader or criminal, perhaps drug-dealer?) Nor was it the media which started the tendency to call something wrong, nasty, mean, vicious, or plain stupid as merely 'inappropriate'.

Understaffed papers relying on news releases and websites may also assimilate jargon and officialese into their journalese. I was consulted the other day on a professional document which spoke of how children aged five with learning difficulties related to their peers. And peers now pop up all over the papers, with Alex Salmond being described as 'facing his peers', by which were meant MSPs much inferior to him in status and political skills. And although there are many times in journalism when you prefer two letters to seven, I don't think journalists are mainly to blame for the increasing use of UK as an adjective when British is meant, as in 'a UK soldier'. I am not sure whether people use this style because they prefer a legal term to one which is emotional as well as geographical or whether it is a bad habit which big government has picked up on from big business. For BP, BG, BT, BAA, BA and others would prefer us to forget what initials stand for.

'Scottish' may have fared better than 'British', though RBS and HBOS set a bad example and STV wasn't very successful in trying to be called Scottish Television rather than by its initials. But I worry about the survival of distinctively Scottish usages in English, many of which reflected the independence after 1707 of Scots law and the Scots Church.

Although Scots law survives, its distinctive vocabulary is liable to be weakened by the imported jargon of human rights (much of it translated from revolutionary French) and the diversion of much journalistic interest into such legal sidelines as unfair dismissal, sexual harassment, and alleged racial discrimination, all of whose dialects originate furth of Scotland. But I suppose 'children's panel' has established both itself (even if outside Scotland it conjures up visions of question time in primary six) and its strangely specialised use of 'reporter' for its executive administrators.

The distinctive dialect of Presbyterianism is in even more trouble, and I suspect that some young reporters (the media ones) may have to ask what a manse or a kirk session is, never mind a ruling elder. I have even seen our teaching elders reported in print as pastors of this or that congregation rather than as ministers of their parish. Some have also complained to me that they are familiarly addressed as 'vicar', though this may be someone taking the St Michael. But there is a problem as ministers with parishes become less influential and ministers with departments more numerous and talkative.

Will the day come when the media deem our ministers 'priests', which they are only in the context of a priesthood of all believers? The question is not facetious, for there is not

only a media practice to describe all Anglican clergypersons as priests (an oversimplification but a valid one) but to extend the term more widely, even to Protestant ministers in France, Hungary and Germany. That is theologically and linguistically as bad as talking about a Free Kirk priest in Stornoway.

I do see occasional attempts at a secular use of that most Presbyterian of prepositions, 'anent' (some of them getting its meaning completely wrong), and occasional conjugations of the verb 'to sist'. But I fear that much Scots Presbyterian vocabulary, administrative and theological, is becoming as remote from ordinary language as such once familiar terms as original seceders, auld lights, and anti-burghers are from ordinary Kirk members' understanding of their history.

But, even if Scots law is being outflanked and the Scots Kirk is in retreat, one might have expected devolution to create some vigorous contributions to Scottish English. There's not much sign of it so far. I searched Scottish parliamentary webpages in search of verbal vigour and innovation but found little, though on one page about MSPs I enjoyed an invitation to 'filter by sex'. But MSP has caught on, being understood even in England, and the drab title of 'Presiding Officer' has been carried along by the good men who have held the office. Alex Salmond's fairly successful verbal transition from a Scottish Executive to a 'Government' has some political but no linguistic significance, while the tendency to talk at Holyrood of 'the Parliament' (and not as at Westminster just of 'Parliament') is a real but very minor variation in the vocabulary of politics.

But I wonder if Holyrood will help me defend an endangered Scottish institution: high tea, with steak, fish and appropriate knives and forks. It was in British Columbia (among Americans dazzled by the historic Empress Hotel in Victoria) that I first encountered the notion that high tea is what you get when sandwiches, scones and cakes are piled high on a stand and served at a very high price. I indignantly overheard the same usage recently from someone comparing the hotels at either end of Princes Street with the London Ritz.

Indignation, however, is not enough. English will always be naturally enriched by innovations reflecting new things and changing ways. Those who fear its impoverishment through loss of old treasures, including Scottish ones, have to use them or lose them.

# The new world of language

R D Kernohan

2014

One of the illusions of this liberal age is that it has liberated the English language. It holds that our language was born free and was, till recently, everywhere in chains – bound by antiquated class-conscious notions of grammar and syntax, and debilitated by hypocrisy and prudery.

But grammar is making a modest comeback, not least because neglect of it grossly handicaps anglophone learners of other languages. Syntax continually asserts itself because linguistic anarchy makes it hard to convey meaning. Even prudery flourishes as never before, though with some redrafting of the old style-book composed by Dr Bowdler and Mrs Grundy.

The redrafting is not to be wondered at in a world where there have been dramatic changes in racial and sexual relationships, and everyone with a computer can be their own publisher, printer, gossip-columnist and leader-writer.

Nor is it surprising that when institutions of many kinds are decayed or derided there should be linguistic as well as moral confusion, for language expresses the instituted values and assumptions of societies as well as individuals. What is alarming is that the extent of the confusion, and even that of the new prudery, is so little recognised, the travails of Jeremy Clarkson notwithstanding.

Mr Clarkson makes a poor martyr in these matters, for verbal finesse has never been his strong point. If he drove cars as recklessly as he uses and chooses words, he would long since have been wrapped up in twisted metal. But the wrath which falls on his head does sometimes assist exploration of the labyrinth of linguistic sensitivities and uncertainties which racial sensitivities have now imposed on our language.

Old Dr Bowdler's St Andrews medical dissertation was on 'intermittent fevers'. He had one himself in trying to tidy up Shakespeare for 'family reading' but no more acutely than our newspaper house-stylists who would turn oriental fast-food into a 'ch\*\*\*y cairry-oot' or the modern American publisher who saddled Joseph Conrad with 'The N-word of the Narcissus'.

I also diagnose a touch of fever in the hue and cry over Clarkson when he made a feeble joke of a word that most of us had never heard of in a derogatory sense, except when Anthony Trollope used it to name a slippery Barchester clergyman. It is always dangerous to protest against 'bad words' (or TV programmes or pop-videos) in ways that widen their currency.

But much of our exchange of old prudery for new comes in the areas of traditional euphemisms accompanying bodily functions and sex. One of the stranger Old Testament



narratives is the one where David spares Saul, who went into a cave 'to cover his feet'. But the Authorised Version's rendering of the Hebrew is preferable to the American version which takes Saul to 'the bathroom' or biblical internet sites which ask if he 'went to the men's room' or used the cave literally as a rest-room.

Many languages share this taste for circumlocutions. Changing times seem merely to bring changed phrases and sometimes damage to old words. More important, however, is a linguistic confusion about sexual relationships which reflects the confused diversity both of public attitudes and private practices. Occasionally, there are consolations for reactionaries like me when we see 'progressive' tendencies at odds with each other.

We know now that in conversation and print it is unwise to call any female person past her early teens a 'girl' or ever to plead that 'boys will be boys', though Neil Lennon is allowed to say of an ill-behaved 23-year-old male player that 'the kid has a few issues'. But we regularly encounter mentions, even on the BBC, of girlfriends and boyfriends among celebrities of inexorably advancing years.

Part of the trouble is deciding just who (in the absence of marriage or civil formality) is a 'partner', for that implies some stability or organised informality. 'Mistress' is hopelessly old-fashioned as well as gender-specific – my laptop rendered that phrase under protest – and English has no exact equivalent to *compagne*, the French expression which President Hollande gave an official (but terminable) status. It looks as if 'lover' is making a comeback, but the problem demonstrates how hard it is to establish sensible linguistic rules when social rules and proprieties fall out of fashion. Meanwhile boy and girl-friends of all ages will, in a jargon as tepid as any from an olden time and even in pretentious newspapers, go on dating and seeing each other, going out, staying in, and being together.

But rather than extend these lamentations, I offer a few suggestions for compilers of house-style books where they still exist and for weary journalists on self-guided tours through the labyrinth.

Get rid of the asterisks. Much of the bad language that now seems to demand them isn't worth quoting anyway. Where it is – as when an exasperated witness suggests an unusual anatomical process to Donald Findlay QC – spell it out. But avoid the prudery that now extends the use of the unsightly and apologetic asterisks to all unpleasant words, such as slut and whore.

Use common sense and historical perspective about derogatory terms associated with race, nationality and religion, as Gilbert and Sullivan societies have been doing for decades in amending a few tasteless lines in *The Mikado* and *Princess Ida*. Distinguish between contemporary speech or performance and historical usage, itself a complex affair, since some expressions (whether about Welsh or Africans) which are now much resented were used without the malice which is associated with them today. But forget the asterisks and initial letters: if it's necessary to use or quote the word, spell it out.

Sex is a more intractable problem, as the actress said to the bishop. (Or is she now an

'actor'?) It's hard to settle on linguistic norms when 'society' reflects such different norms and includes influential sectors which reject the concept of normality. But I offer a few suggestions on matters of detail and couple of guiding principles. Don't say termination when you mean abortion. Don't pretend that all afflictions are merely challenges. Consider whether more frequent references to spouses may, among other things, head off the linguistic problems created when marriage law permits pairings which are not husband and wife. I suspect common speech will for the foreseeable future bridle at 'happy couples' of husbands and same-sex wives.

The guiding principles are that good writing should attempt, sometimes in face of provocation, to reflect good manners but should realise that regular sacrifice of robustness in language can threaten clarity of thought as well as expression. I appreciate that this isn't easy for those who still have to write and broadcast daily in a hurry. As they might put it, there are real issues in deciding what's inappropriate and when words are problematical. But they should try harder and – strange advice as it may seem from an institutionalised reactionary – they should be more sceptical about contemporary linguistic orthodoxies.

# Honest wordsmiths and mere word-spivs

Walter Humes

2014

Having been asked in recent years to write obituaries of people I knew well, I have developed a keen interest in this minor art form. It provides a challenge to the writer, requiring careful checking of dates and facts, a fair assessment of the deceased's achievements and some idea of his or her distinctive human qualities.

A recent obituary of someone I had never met, but who was clearly a revered figure within his own community, gave me a real sense of the kind of man he was. It also contained a quotation from one of his books which provided a stimulus for the main part of this article.

The subject of the obituary was Father Gerard W Hughes, a Jesuit priest, who was born in Skelmorlie, Ayrshire, in 1924 and died on 4 November this year at the age of 90. His academic career took him to Oxford, London and Frankfurt, before becoming Catholic chaplain at Glasgow University from 1967 to 1975. Father Hughes was not afraid of controversy and was twice dismissed (later reinstated) by the Archbishop of Glasgow, first for criticising Pope Paul VI's 1968 encyclical confirming the Vatican's ban on contraception, and later for giving the sacrament to non-Catholics. It takes courage to challenge the hierarchy of an institution used to compliance by both its clerical and lay members.

Father Hughes was also a distinguished writer. In 1985, he published *God of Surprises* which was translated into 20 languages and became an international best-seller. Just before he died, his final book, *Cry of Wonder*, appeared. It examines the effects of the massive advances in technology on individuals who are seeking meaning and purpose in life, and encourages them to trust in their own experience rather than the various 'experts' who claim to provide answers to the perplexities of the human condition. Father Hughes attempts to reinstate the importance of spirituality in a society which has progressively retreated from faith commitment.

The quotation which caught my attention was this: 'We have lost the link between the words we use and what we actually do'. Elsewhere in the book, a fuller formulation of the point is offered: 'There is a deepening split developing between our words and the truth of things. This is not a recent phenomenon... What is new today is the breadth and depth of the split, so vastly and deeply ingrained in us that we are no longer aware of it'. My reading of this will lead in a different direction from the one pursued by Father Hughes, suggesting that his insight can be applied in a range of contexts.

Words are important and can be used for many worthy purposes: to record events; to explain and clarify; to tell inspiring stories; to give voice to those who are unable to speak

for themselves; to create a vision of a better future. But words can also be employed for less admirable purposes: to mislead and confuse; to obscure and conceal; to persuade the vulnerable; to offer false reassurance; to spread misinformation; to foster dangerous illusions; to protect vested interests.

It is in the deployment of these discreditable linguistic techniques that the gulf between words and actions becomes apparent. And there are grounds for thinking, as Father Hughes suggests, that the disjunction between the two has accelerated over the last century. It is no accident that the academic field of discourse analysis, which seeks to explain the connections between language, knowledge and power, has come to the fore in recent decades. The misuse of language to promote and sustain certain assumptions about how societies are organised, and the way people should live, is an important element in explaining inequality and the differential distribution of power.

Where is the evidence for this? The most obvious field is politics where the gap between ambitious promises and disappointing achievements is of long standing and applies to all the main parties. A study of successive election manifestos and the subsequent performance of governments would reveal many anomalies. What is relatively new is the extent to which the split between words and actions has been sustained by the sophisticated efforts of an army of spin-doctors, whose role is to use words to give the illusion of effective government – what the American political theorist Murray Edelman has called 'policy as spectacle' rather than policy which leads to substantive results. Statistics are reconfigured, costs are creatively presented and old ideas are given a cosmetic makeover in order to create the impression that things are going well. Meanwhile, the prevailing order continues much as before.

The bureaucratic machinery of government supports this process. Civil servants are expected to have a facility in language, drafting and redrafting policy documents to put a positive gloss on what is happening. Those who get to the very top become experts at producing polished letters which seem to respond to problems or issues, but which actually say nothing, albeit with a touch of style.

It takes a very persistent person to get anywhere in the face of such verbal obstruction. Even organisations which are supposed to defend the interests of the public against bureaucratic failure sometimes adopt the same linguistic tactics in their correspondence with complainants. Patients First, which supports people pursuing complaints against health authorities, has recently said that there is little point in taking concerns to the NHS Ombudsman in England, since it has lost faith in the organisation's ability to investigate matters properly.

Even more blatant examples of the misuse of language, and its separation from reality, can be found in the fields of advertising and public relations. Advertisers use words and images to conjure up attractive illusions. Sometimes they are given a rap over the knuckles by the Advertising Standards Authority for making misleading claims, but most of the time their linguistic conjuring passes without comment. The motive is crudely

commercial – to convince people that their lives will be transformed by the purchase of material goods. In a grossly materialistic society, such as ours, the point of satisfaction is never reached.

Public relations companies have also become experts at replacing reality with images of various kinds. They can assist in the rebranding of companies going through a difficult period – perhaps by crafting a 'mission statement' replete with the fashionable buzz-words of the moment. They can even help to rehabilitate dodgy political regimes on the international stage by placing press releases with pliable journalists who are more interested in easy copy than with finding out the truth. There are no moral qualms to be overcome: the only consideration is the fee that can be negotiated.

In all of this, the internet has become a very valuable resource. Public, private and voluntary organisations can set up websites which use positive, upbeat language to convey an impression of social responsibility and operational competence. Boasting becomes more important than evidence. In this context, what appears to be the case assumes greater importance than what is actually happening on the ground. It is, after all, a 'virtual' world.

Individuals too are caught up in this process. On social networking sites, they can use words and pictures to construct an identity that may be at odds with their real selves. In some cases, they do this for sinister purposes, in others merely to play out some sad fantasy. The internet has provided a new arena in which to exemplify the disjunction between words and deeds.

Father Hughes, in his final book, offers an apocalyptic vision of where this trend is leading. He writes: 'It's a most vicious illness: it faces us with annihilation'. He was presumably thinking of spiritual annihilation. But the social and cultural aspects of the trend are equally disturbing. The gradual ascendancy of manipulative word-spivs over honest wordsmiths has led us down a very dangerous road.

# Trigger warning

Katie Grant

2016

*Trigger warning: this column is written by a white, middle-class English woman. Trigger warning: this column may contain views that don't entirely coincide with yours. Trigger warning: this writer sometimes quotes from other writers who might, once, or even twice if you research deeply enough, have done or said something you might find upsetting. Trigger warning: this writer sometimes mentions Mrs Thatcher without spitting.*

We've long been subjected to below-signature email disclaimers. Every law firm, for example, prints a barrage of disclaimer verbiage six times longer than the actual email, and though the start of this column may be slightly exaggerated, soon the front of your emails will be similarly clad. In case you're wise enough not to follow the latest fashions in indignation – Facebook is Indignation Central; everybody's furious about something so Facebook is introducing an 'angry' button for the time-saving digital stab – 'trigger warnings' are an alert that something in what follows might disturb, alarm or offend. They're all the (out)rage.

Trigger warnings are the grandchild, or step-child – I was going to write b\*\*\*\*\*d child, but that probably requires a trigger warning – of political correctness. Poor political correctness! It's come a long way since 1793 when the term was first coined in an American law-suit. After being taken up and batted about by left and right, its most modern incarnation was well described by none other than President Bush (George H, not George W) as the 'laudable desire to sweep away the debris of racism and sexism and hatred', though he also warned that 'it replaces old prejudice with new ones' and 'declares certain topics off-limits, certain expressions off-limits, even certain gestures off-limits'.

Actually, the threat to free speech notwithstanding, the placing of some words or expressions 'off-limits' is arguably a good trade-off. When I remember some of the words flung about as insults in 1970's school playgrounds, I'm mortified. The old adage 'sticks and stones may break my bones but words can never hurt me' isn't true of all words.

But there's a difference between using words with care, or in extreme cases not using them at all, and being obliged always to treat readers, viewers or listeners as though they're too fragile to be exposed to anything they might find alarming or upsetting, or that might remind them of anything alarming and upsetting. Yet, as Frank Furedi illustrates in *The End of Argument*, trigger warnings are moving like a censorious infection across the Western world.

Even universities – perhaps *especially* universities – once at least notional free spaces for any type of discussion, are having their curriculums rattled by students demanding

trigger warnings be attached to texts which contain traumatic scenes. At New York's Colombia University, for example, some students 'questioned the professor's judgement' when he/she failed to warn them that Ovid's *Metamorphoses* contained scenes of rape and sexual assault.

According to Furedi, supporters of trigger warnings argue that 'readers need to be forewarned that the ideas, views, images and attitudes they are about to encounter may make them feel uncomfortable or even traumatised'. He dismisses this argument, and indeed, even if you think the argument has some merit, trigger warnings don't really work. On the one hand, they encourage people not to face upset, and if you don't face your demons, you can't conquer them. On the other, they encourage guilty and creepy voyeurism. A trigger warning or its sister, the graphic image warning, is click-bait as well as caution.

And where to stop? Obviously the newly discovered Beatrix Potter story, *Kitty-in-Boots*, to be published in the autumn, should be 'triggered'. From tasters, Kitty seems to be kitted out in the 'full gamekeeper', complete with potentially disturbing dead game. Perhaps all Beatrix Potter books need a warning. After all, *Peter Rabbit* faces rural violence, and *The Tale of Samuel Whiskers* will surely trigger terror every time a nervous reader hears a scuffling or a scratching. If you remember, Tom Kitten himself, the intended victim of 'old rat' Samuel and his wife, Anna Maria, was so traumatised by being almost turned into a dumpling that ever afterwards he was frightened of anything bigger than a mouse.

But seriously, it's hard to think of any text that doesn't trigger something and any text that triggers nothing isn't worth reading. What's more, if modern university students must be protected from even fictional distressing sights, sounds and experiences, how will they cope after graduation when presented, unprotected, with the hideous sights, sounds and experiences through which the human race has bungled and is still bungling its way to perdition?

It's possible, of course, they won't have to. Last week, I'm sure I spotted a 'graphic image' warning over photographs of the whales beached at Skegness. In the blubber, as it were – whoops, trigger warning needed there. Begin again. Trigger warning: tasteless but accurate pun to follow. In the blubber, as it were, a dead whale is an imposing and possibly upsetting sight, but on the internet, they're just large grey objects lying in the sand. There was little blood. Nobody was chopping them up. Naturally, it's fine to be upset about dead whales. Up to a point, I am myself. Dead whales are more moving than, say, dead jellyfish or dead trout. But if we need protecting from feelings generated by a photograph of intact dead whales lying peacefully in the sand, how are we to manage the daily savagery of Daesh?

And where's the consistency? 'Graphic image' warnings no longer routinely accompany static archive photographs of men in orange jumpsuits flanked by knife-wielding executioners. In my view, these pictures shouldn't be published at all, not

because they're ghastly, which they are, extremely, but because Daesh publish them in order to provoke the horror on which death-cults feed, then watch with satisfaction as the same media outlets which feel we need protecting from images of dead whales, publish the horror again and again.

Finally, if you've been upset by issues raised in this piece, feel free to write in and complain, though if you read the first paragraph properly, you can hardly claim you weren't warned.



# EU REFERENDUM

# An inspector calls

Kenneth Roy

2016

*This piece was published on the eve of the EU referendum.*

Last Friday, I went to the BBC in Glasgow for a new experience, as the subject of a long and personally probing interview by Isabel Fraser. When I say 'long', it was half an hour. But if five minutes of airtime is considered fairly generous these days, 30 must be close to eternity.

Near the end, Isabel asked me why I hadn't retired when I said I would almost two years ago. It is indeed an embarrassment. The farewell tour continues with no final gig in sight. What am I waiting for?

Maybe I'm hanging on for something good to happen in the world; it is a natural human desire to go out on a high. In that case, I might be here until the arrival of the men in the white coats. I'm reminded of a character in a David Hare play who said he didn't read the newspapers because he didn't approve of the news any more. The line usually raises a laugh, but more and more it is laughter on the edge. The news is unbearable. The news is killing us.

Here I introduce one of my favourite accessories, that pair of rose-tinted spectacles which I keep for the occasional party turn. 'My' decade – when I was young and enjoying myself – was the 60s. Somebody – this being the 60s, no-one could agree who it was – said that if you could remember the 60s, you weren't there. But I was there, and I remember them well. I remember, for example, the excitement of voting for Harold Wilson. You scoff. But it did feel exciting. I adored Harold Wilson – the 13th Mr Wilson as he was known, for reasons too obscure to explain. For a while, I smoked a pipe in his honour.

I jest not. Young men and women, voting for the first time as I was, did make a difference. They helped to make possible a raft of social reforms, either introduced by the Labour Government itself or through private members' bills for which the Wilson Administration made parliamentary time: the abolition of the death penalty (1965), the legalisation of abortion and homosexuality (1967), the relaxation of the law on divorce (1969).

Harold's pet project was the extension of higher education through the foundation of the Open University (1969), maybe the most enlightened single measure of any post-war government. I like to claim a tiny bit of the credit for that.

And I also voted for a revolution in government policy on the arts: the appointment of the first Arts Minister (Jennie Lee) and a massive investment in new theatres and galleries in provincial Britain.

We had a ball. The last dance came too soon.

Now I remove my rose-tinted specs and return them to the attic where they belong. They might have made their final appearance. For all of a sudden it is the 22nd of June 2016 and the eve of something or other. Whatever it is, it doesn't smell good. The intervening years have gone in a blur, and Britain feels less joyful, less tolerant, than it has ever felt in my lifetime. How does it feel? It feels mean-spirited.

For the last week, since the murder of Jo Cox, we have been exposed to the statue of Joseph Priestley in the village of Birstall, Yorkshire. Joseph Priestley was the man who 'discovered' oxygen. We could use some. The air is stifling and even when we open a window, we struggle for breath. The weeks of hatred and vituperation have taken it away. They have been breathtaking.

Intrigued by the re-appearance of the Priestleys, I've been thinking about another of them: John Boynton Priestley from nearby Bradford, an essayist, novelist, dramatist and socialist; that's a lot of ists. He was also a grumpy old sod and a womaniser. He too smoked a pipe. He was prolific; he never stopped writing. But he is remembered mostly for a single play, which he wrote towards the end of the Second World War but which he set two years before the start of the first. It covers a single evening in the life of a smug, prosperous Midlands family, the Birleys, who are enjoying a celebratory dinner. It is interrupted by an unexpected caller, an inspector of police. A young woman is dead.

It emerges in the course of his interrogation that every member of the Birley family contributed in some way to Eva Smith's suicide. It's all a bit schematic; at times it creaks. Yet this standby of tatty rep – with its old-fashioned Christian Socialist values, its whiff of the supernatural, its overhanging presentiment of mass slaughter, its mysterious denouement – somehow moves and provokes modern audiences. It has become one of the classics of our age. Young people love it.

Now, why might that be? It's a question worth asking at the end of this vicious campaign, as we look with foreboding to a denouement of our own making in the early hours of Friday. I suspect what appeals to young people about this play, what gives it meaning in their own lives, is that it preaches – and it does preach – the importance of moral responsibility.

Read the inspector's closing speech. I've retained the name of the original character, Eva Smith, but it might be interesting if you substituted the name of a young woman from an ethnic minority.

*But just remember this. One Eva Smith has gone – but there are millions and millions of Eva Smiths and John Smiths left with us, with their lives, their hopes and their fears, their suffering and a choice of happiness, all intertwined with our lives and what we think and say and do. We don't live alone. We are members of one body. We are responsible for each other. And I tell you that the time will soon come when, if men will not learn that lesson, then they will be taught it in fire and blood and anguish.*

In the end, the early summer of 2016 was never about money, about a balance of economic advantage, about notions of sovereignty, about the parrot cries of 'freedom for Britain' or 'Britain first'. It was not even about immigration. It was about a shocking want of kindness, an absence of love, a grievous loss of humanity. The inspector is calling. Again he's calling. This time, he's calling on us.

# It's like moving house

Katie Grant

2016

In June 1789, as the French Revolution gathered pace, Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire, was besieged in her Paris hotel. Her besiegers were not the revolutionary mob, but city tradesmen. 'I am overwhelmed by stay-makers,' she wrote, her letters full of visits to the opera and all manner of sociability. Fitting stays into dresses may be a task for re-enactors these days but most of us experience constitutional turmoil through the hum of domesticity.

As leaders rise and fall, we empty washing machines, commute to work, push supermarket trolleys, watch the football/tennis/cricket and wonder if we need umbrellas. If memory serves me right, one of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles* marks 1066 with the entry 'not much happened this year'. The truth, for most of us, is that during and post Brexit, life will bump on, our personal successes and disasters looming larger on our radar than constitutional and financial machinations. Stock market up, stock market down, price of gold up, price of gold down, promises made, promises broken: these will, unless they directly affect your weekly income, matter less than the immediate drama of the roof leaking or the car refusing to start.

But something has changed. When it rained on my washing this morning, my temper was shorter – a clear indication of anxiety. Last Friday, on the train to Edinburgh, I smiled at people speaking foreign languages to show they were welcome. Stupid, I know. Once inside, the washing dried perfectly happily. God knows what the people I smiled at thought I was smiling about. I simply cling to what I felt and what I did because my feelings and actions are within my control, and after Friday morning, nothing else seems to be.

Events pile thickly one on the other: resignations; speeches; numbers; what can happen; what can't happen; and whoops, what *is* happening. Commentators grasp this angle and that angle, their commentary, in the main, of only passing value since there are so many angles, each angle contingent on another, to say nothing of the angles that haven't yet hove into view. It's like moving house. Worse, it's like moving into a house that isn't yet built. You're talking about where the beds should go, forgetting that beds need floors, so you talk about floors, forgetting you can't lay floors without walls, so you talk about walls, forgetting you can't build walls without a roof, yet beds are important, so you find yourself talking about beds

again. In other words, there are so many aspects to Brexit, where the hell do you start?

I'm a list person. My lists began as follows: political consequences, social consequences, financial consequences, diplomatic. Hopeless. Too many subdivisions: Westminster (Prime Minister? Party Splits? Who's actually in charge?); Holyrood (What can it do? Whither Ruth Davidson?); Brussels (Article 50, treaty change, regulations); Conservative Party (leadership, division, characters, BoJo v?); Labour Party (Corbyn, MPs v membership, trades unions); UKIP (Disband? Still cause trouble?); SNP (Scotland, indyref2, euro?).

And then I realise that this far from comprehensive list is still only looking at things from a UK angle. What do the other EU member states think? What will they do? I abandon lists in the face of one huge truth: Europe's problems won't pause for Brexit and nor will the world's. Whilst we're drowning in the dreary and selfish minutiae of extrication, the Middle East will continue its dire conflagration, the US to turn inwards and Russia to stare balefully over its borders. Perhaps the Brexiteers are right, that we can paddle our own canoe but a canoe ain't much cop against freighters.

Here, though, for what they're worth, are my current thoughts. I won't call them certainties because I'm clean out of certainties. I'm reverting to lists because though they're unsatisfactory, they're all I've got:

1. That whilst for Britain good as well as bad will come from leaving the EU, we've damaged something we should have been trying to improve;
2. That our children, who care about Europe as a whole, are very unhappy;
3. That despite all the promises made, Britain isn't going to be 'greater', whatever that means;
4. That in Scotland, if indyref2 involves accepting the euro, that will be a major problem, so we're between the proverbial rock and hard place;
5. That the law of unintended consequences will prevail.

'We are frightened tonight,' Georgiana eventually wrote from her hotel. '... all is license and confusion'. I don't know what she'd have made of today's confusions but I feel she'd be glad of her stays.

# The day the British Empire finally expired

Dennis Smith

2016

Some empires go out with a bang, overthrown by rivals. Some go with a whimper, dwindling into inanity. Others undergo weird transformations: the Russian Empire was formally abolished by the 1917 revolution but imperialist thought patterns continued to underlie Soviet policy (and still linger on in the mind of Vladimir Putin).

Future historians, looking back, may nominate 23 June 2016 as the day when the British Empire finally expired. They may also see it as the date when the English finally began the task of constructing for themselves a genuine democratic identity. Whatever route they choose, their journey is likely to be long and arduous.

In the long-term, imperialism and democracy are incompatible: the rise of nation-states means the fall of empires. English expansion began nearly 1,000 years ago with the Anglo-Norman invasion of Ireland, climaxed, and then fell back in the face of growing demands for democratic self-determination. Charged with holding this difficult balance, Westminster retained an essentially imperial role. This is why it has proved so hard to reform: imperial mystique must not be weakened by democratic transparency.

In 1953, at the age of eight, I witnessed the coronation of Queen Elizabeth (I or II according to taste). My most vivid memory rewinds an apparently endless procession of military units in exotic uniforms representing every tiny part of the Empire and Commonwealth – the last manifestation, as things turned out, of Britain's imperial grandeur. There was talk of a new Elizabethan age, with a reincarnated Good Queen Bess reigning over a reinvigorated Empire. Three years later, at Suez, the edifice came crashing to the ground.

But this was never openly acknowledged. In many eyes, the Commonwealth constituted a new, more democratic and still powerful continuation of the Empire. My staunchly-Conservative family were outraged when Dean Acheson pronounced in 1962 that 'Great Britain has lost an Empire and has not yet found a role'. For them, the Empire lived on, an item of faith that transcended empirical realities.

The Queen's role as head of the Commonwealth was important here and had unfortunate consequences. It disguised the UK's changed status, particularly after it eventually joined the EEC, and inhibited parliamentary reform. The pre-modern and pre-democratic nature of Westminster practices was celebrated rather than confronted – think of Carnaby Street and Tony Blair's 'Cool Britannia'.

This is especially true of England. While Scotland has made some progress in reconceiving itself as a democratic polity, England remains trapped between Empire and democracy, Britishness and Englishness. What other ancient European nation lacks its own national parliament? What other nation has such a confusing and contradictory mess of 'national' institutions?

Some institutions, like the Imperial War Museum, remain unrepentantly imperial. Some, like the BBC and the British Museum, assert a Britain- or UK-wide role. A few, like the Arts Council of England, proclaim themselves as English (though, typically, the ACE exercises some UK-wide responsibilities). But many operate under the shifty name of 'national'. Since Scotland has its own Scottish National Gallery and Scottish National Portrait Gallery, one might expect their London equivalents to represent England. But, in practice, their role is ambivalent and undefined. When the English look for a mirror to reflect their identity, it is no surprise that they find only cloudy distortions.

How many nations are there in the UK? Unlike the question: 'How many angels can dance on the head of a pin?' This question really matters in a world where – at least for the moment – democratic nation-states form the building-blocks of the international order.

Far from improving matters, devolution has in some ways made things worse. There have been real gains for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, but the UK as a whole has arguably become less democratic. Lines of accountability have been blurred, new inequalities have appeared and voters (particularly in England) have felt alienated and disempowered.

If we take liberty, equality and fraternity as our guiding principles, then equality of voice within agreed political boundaries lies at the heart of democracy. Asymmetric devolution, as practised in the UK, goes in precisely the opposition direction: it creates a variety of jurisdictions with unequal rights, powers and responsibilities. The new UK constitutional settlement resembles nothing so much as the 'parcellised sovereignties' of *ancien régime* France. To any egalitarian, asymmetry should appear as an abomination.

The world would be a better place if England in the 1960s and 1970s had shaken off its imperial delusions and constituted itself as an ordinary democratic nation among nations. But the attractions of 'great power status' and 'punching above our weight' were always too strong.

So we find ourselves where we are. In many respects, England now faces the same challenges of democratic nation-building as Scotland, though the English may have more ghosts to exorcise. But it seems likely that we must face them separately. The task of creating a unified British demos now looks beyond the skill of man (or woman).



# How the England I knew and loved made Brexit possible

Kenneth Roy

2016

## 1.

*'Isn't history beautiful?' – Marine Le Pen to Nigel Farage after his speech in the European Parliament, 28 June 2016*

Twenty years ago, in June 1996, I came to the end of a year-long assignment for *The Observer* (newspaper), a series of weekly despatches entitled, with embarrassing over-statement, 'Kenneth Roy's Britain'. It amounted to nothing more than a collection of sketches from a different location every week; for various reasons it was not the happiest experience. But it did give me an opportunity to travel more or less the length and breadth of a country that had until then been largely unfamiliar to me. I saw a lot of England.

The events of the last week have sent me scurrying back to those articles, a body of ancient work in journalistic terms, which had been anthologised in a short book. I was looking for clues to the present condition of England, a country now exposed to the world's ridicule and disdain, yet a country that I chronicled with critical affection week after week in a newspaper.

Had I, during those random travels, missed something about the essential condition of England? The alternative seemed barely conceivable: that it had metamorphosed in some profound way between the summer of 1996 – the last summer of Conservative rule before the advent of Tony Blair's cool Britannia – and the summer of 2016 – the summer of Brexit, Farage and Johnson – without anyone really noticing.

I wasn't completely blinkered (I can say that now, having re-read the book). Clues there were. But I was a poor detective. I made no attempt to find a pattern in them; I failed to discern how beautiful history is made.

## 2.

One evening in the winter of 1995-96, I arrived in Castleford, a small ex-mining town in Yorkshire, without a plan. It was not quite 7 o'clock – I noted the time – and the streets of Castleford were deserted. I went to a taxi office and asked if there was anything happening, anywhere I might go for amusement or distraction.

They suggested the dogs, so I went to the dogs and collected my sketch for the week. On the way there, I was impressed by the sight of smart-looking modern factories and 'enterprise parks' on the periphery and I remember thinking that, despite initial appearances to the contrary, there was some activity in Castleford – that it hadn't been left behind after all. But the absence of any visible sense of community impressed me too; I wondered where all the redundant miners drank, for the few pubs were empty, miserable dens. Castleford might have been the most dispiriting place I encountered in all of England.

I went to a second ex-mining town, Spennymoor – part of young Tony Blair's constituency, as it happened – to meet an artist whose work I admired, Norman Cornish, an ex-miner himself, and asked about his painting of a fish and chip shop, O Eddy's, that I'd seen in the Laing art gallery in Newcastle-upon-Tyne. Mr Cornish explained that O Eddy's had been demolished long ago. They'd built a car park on the site.

Without stepping out of Spennymoor, Norman Cornish had created a metaphysical universe through his work, painting the faces of the miners and their wives and giving them a spiritual quality. There were no pits left. Mrs Thatcher had seen off the coalfield of County Durham too. Mr Cornish lamented the loss of companionship in the mining community; he felt it keenly.

After leaving him, I noted down the names of the factories on the outskirts – Electrolux, Thorn EMI, etc – just as I had on the road to the dogs at Castleford, and again lazily reassured myself that everything was all right.

In Newcastle itself, I spent a meditative afternoon in the Silent Room of the 200-year-old Literary and Philosophical Society, a room guarded by the statue of Trotter Brockett, a local philosopher. The people at the Lit and Phil instructed me in the history of the institution. They said it had been the product of an age of inquiry, in which intelligent people were excited by ideas and restless to extend the boundaries of knowledge. We discussed what had happened to that spirit of inquiry and they assured me that it had been formalised in higher education. I was a little sceptical.

That night, the streets of the city were packed with young people, many incapably drunk, spilling out of clubs and bars. The hysteria in the air may have been slightly disturbing, now that I come to reflect on it.

In Manchester, the 'shock city' of Victorian England, where Friedrich Engel's experience of working in his father's cotton factory helped to inspire the communist manifesto, the gay village in Canal Street was being stalked by drug barons from Salford – 'virtually untouchable' according to the local press – and one estimate put the value of the illicit ecstasy trade at £100,000 a week. Manchester felt

close to anarchy; I wondered in print why any criminals in modern Britain should be 'virtually untouchable' and invited the chief constable to do something about it. I didn't hear back.

The most desperate place I visited was Castle Vale, an estate on the edge of Birmingham. In 1969, they had moved 20,000 people from the Edwardian slums of the city centre to the site of a former aerodrome and dumped them there in 34 high-rise blocks, badly built and ruinously expensive to heat. I picked a hazardous route through broken glass and pigeon droppings to the only shopping centre, whose gable end was plastered in BNP slogans. Castle Vale, a ghetto of poor whites, had long been targeted by the far right as a fertile recruiting ground.

An 'action trust' had recently taken over the running of the estate from the city council. Unemployment was 26%, more than half the pupils at the local school left without a single qualification, and the health of the population was so wretched that a quarter of the houses had had to be physically adapted. Ten years later, curious to know what had become of Castle Vale, I discovered that £200m of public money had been lavished on it but that it remained an area of multiple deprivation.

Among my rural excursions, I have a special reason for recalling Diss, a market town in Norfolk, where that melancholy observer of the English scene, John Betjeman, had once enjoyed a drink in the Jolly Porter. My newspaper had paid me no expenses for weeks; I was running short of money and phoned the newsdesk in desperation from a call box (that was how it was done in 1996). Then I asked someone for directions to the Jolly Porter. She replied that the old woman who owned it had had a fall and retired. The pub had been demolished and they'd built a cement works on the site. A car park in Spennymoor; a cement works in Diss – it made no difference; everywhere I went, it felt as if I had just missed England.

Diss wasn't much of a market town any more, and over a pub lunch I heard ruddy-faced regulars in Barbour jackets talking contemptuously of London and of the metropolitan opinions in newspapers and on the BBC; they had no time for any of them. I wondered why people who could afford Barbour jackets were so resentful, considering that, to this outsider, Diss felt like an agreeable place to live – more agreeable, certainly, than the tinderbox of Castle Vale.

But I must have sensed something about Diss. It was snowing quite hard and I ended the piece by observing that it seemed to be settling on the local office of the Child Support Agency and on the claimants' letterbox of the DSS.

So many clues pointing in so many directions, yet I didn't make much of any of them. Nor, however, did anyone else.

### 3.

Now I look at the results of last week's referendum. Of the places I have mentioned, only Manchester voted decisively to Remain; and even there, four out of every 10 were for leaving.

In North Norfolk – the local authority area of Diss – the Leave vote was 59%; I imagine the ruddy-faced regulars, now grown old, were among the keener opponents of the European Union. In Wakefield – of which Castleford is part – it was 66%; whatever the branch factories and the enterprise parks did for the people, it clearly wasn't enough. In Tony Blair's old constituency, the home of Norman Cornish, it was 61%.

Birmingham also voted to leave, though much more narrowly; one can only surmise how the electors of Castle Vale may have contributed to that outcome. And Newcastle, to the dismay of many on referendum night, was only marginally Remain; earlier this week, not far from the home of the Lit and Phil, a huge banner appeared. 'Stop the immigration, start the repatriation', it read. In these ways, what Marine le Pen calls beautiful history has been made.

# The British press and its brutal abuse of power

Kenneth Roy

2016

I bring you news: what you might construe as a fact. The fact is that facts are out; finished. Actually, this isn't a fact. Like so many statements presented as fact, it is just an opinion. But it is an opinion worth listening to, if only because it has taken us out of the European Union.

Aaron Banks, the right-wing businessman who helped to bankroll the Leave campaign and now proposes to form his own party, has diagnosed the essential problem with Remain: 'It featured fact, fact, fact, fact, fact. It just doesn't work. You have got to connect with people emotionally'. It seems that a Washington DC outfit specialising in political strategy gave the same advice to the organisers of Leave: 'The facts don't work'.

But lies do. Nearly two-thirds of those who voted to quit the EU believe they were misled by Leave's flagship pledge to give the NHS the £350m a week which it claimed was being sent to Brussels. Down there in the kindergarten they've started for the British electorate, the infants swallowed it whole. And then, within hours of the result, the shameless Farage denied it; it had been all a lot of nonsense. Natch. Lies work.

In cyberspace, the spectacular investment in the NHS had been endlessly tweeted and re-tweeted, facebooked, instagrammed and blogged without mercy until it became one of the motifs of the campaign; Johnson – who, in those days, tended to be affectionately known as Boris – connected with the people emotionally by splashing the claim about the £350m a week all over his battle bus.

Johnson knew, Gove knew, Farage knew, Leave knew the essential facts (the facts that don't work any more): although the UK's membership fee to the EU is £18bn a year, we receive an instant rebate of £5bn, applied straight away, and the EU hands back a further £4bn in subsidies, mostly to farmers and poorer regions. So we don't send Brussels £350m a week. Never have. It's pure fiction.

The mainstream media could have nailed the lie. But the BBC, whose constitutional duty is to 'inform' the nation, was too hung up on some deluded notion of balance to expose it for what it was, while the newspapers... well, you couldn't make it up. You couldn't make it up – because they already had.

The Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at Oxford University has done some useful preliminary work on the naked bias of the press coverage. It has found

that, in the first two months of the campaign (to the end of April), 69% of the politicians quoted in national newspaper coverage were Conservatives and only 14% Labour; that three-quarters of the campaign spokespersons quoted were pro-Leave; and that 45% of opinion pieces favoured leaving and only 27% backed remaining.

When the initial research was completed, the top four topics in the 'debate' were the economy, trade, sovereignty and currency; at that stage, only the *Daily Express* was obsessed by immigration. It will be interesting to see how the bias intensified in the second half of the campaign, when the hysteria over Johnny Foreigner became more general and Leave sedulously exploited public prejudice and fear. For these results from Oxford, we must wait.

But statistical analysis tells us only half the story: it tells us in general terms what we already sensed, enlightening us on how bad it really was. What it doesn't convey is the power of the 'emotional connection' that Leave employed as a weapon: the substitution of raw feeling for truth that may have turned public opinion in the final weeks.

Two questions arise from the post-Brexit disclosures of how the campaign was won.

First, if the discredited leaders of Leave – Johnson and Gove – built their crusade on a lie, having been advised that 'the facts don't work', and if two-thirds of the people now believe they were misled, how legitimate is the result? As I pointed out here last Friday, only 37.4% of the total electorate voted to leave. The mandate was feeble in the first place. It is a lot weaker now.

Second, how do we go on functioning in a democracy in which public misinformation directed at a poorly educated majority is accepted as the norm? The journalist wife of a contender for the leadership of Britain reminded him in an email of the importance of satisfying such people as Murdoch and Dacre, advising him to accommodate their wishes. It was an insight into a world of unaccountable power, a power brutally abused during the most disgraceful episode in modern British history.

But that's okay. Newspaper sales are soaring on the back of it.

# The illusion that we can 'have our country back'

Ronnie Smith

2016

'Fog in the Channel, Europe Cut Off': This is a headline from a London newspaper in the late Victorian era that I was told about at school. I can't remember which newspaper, it may have been *The Times*, but I regard my source as an impeccable being – my much admired secondary history teacher.

It spoke to a nation in its absolute prime, leading a global empire comprising the most powerful economy the world had ever seen. It was a nation that ruled the world's oceans with a Navy created to protect the long commercial lines of communication to Africa, Asia and the Americas. A Navy whose policy was to be twice as big as those of its two most powerful competitors combined and an Army designed to be professional enough to deal with native uprisings but too small to compete with the huge but irrelevant land forces of Germany, France and Russia.

Britain did not have to care about Europe in the late 19th century because her economic interests – the markets for her manufactured goods and sources of raw materials – lay elsewhere. Britain was the trading nation supreme. With fog in the Channel, Europe really was cut off and thankfully unseen.

Today, after a brief affair, Britain has turned her rudder to continental Europe once more, currently the world's largest trading block. We have our country back and from behind her newly-controlled borders and at the behest of a majority who appear to have little understanding of economics, she will seek, so we are told, to re-establish direct trade agreements in the wider world. What are the prospects of this actually happening, what does Britain have to trade?

One of my clearest memories from the time of Harold Wilson's Government in the 1960s was the almost biblical credibility given to the monthly balance of trade figures. Breaths were held and cigarettes were nervously lit as *BBC News* pronounced on the health of the economy using export/import results and the mysterious imponderable of 'invisible earnings'. The information seemed quite simple to understand: did Britain earn more or less than she spent by trade with the rest of the world? Yes, good. No, bad.

The BBC stopped giving us the monthly balance of trade figures a long time ago. Instead, we receive nightly bulletins from the City of London on the valuation of companies on the various stock markets in Britain and elsewhere. This information is meaningless to most people and only useful to shareholders, their brokers and

investment bankers. The FTSE induces hysterical panic one evening and worshipful reassurance the next. It holds the nation in its thrall as we watch the line on the graph rise and fall at the end of each day. It is a slice of drama for a largely ignorant audience.

The population are no longer shown Britain's monthly balance of trade figures because, as [www.tradingeconomics.com](http://www.tradingeconomics.com) helpfully informs us, Britain has continuously run a massive trading deficit since 1989. Even with what are now called financial services and capital movement earnings, Britain runs at a trading loss. She is no longer the trading nation supreme.

Now, the factors that combine to create the monthly balance of trade snapshot of the economy are too varied and complex for me to attempt to explain here, but let's take a quick look at industrial manufacturing as an example.

The next time you are sitting in a jam on the M25 or on the M6 near Birmingham, or on the Edinburgh ring-road, take a look around you and consider how many vehicles you see that are manufactured by British-owned companies. Next time you are close to a major British river, try to find a shipyard. Next time you are at a British airport, take some time to find a wholly British-made aircraft. When you go to buy your next phone see if you can find that world class British-designed and assembled smartphone. We do not make never mind export, mass-market manufactured goods any more and that is not the fault of the EU.

The British economy is now structured around property, retail and financial services. We buy and sell houses to each other and care passionately about the property market. We buy vast amounts of food and other goods from supermarkets and malls but much of the produce is imported and the shops are owned by foreign shareholders. The City of London is the one economic constant remaining from the days of the British Empire, second only in power and influence to Wall Street. Without the profits made by the City, Britain's trading position would be spectacularly worse. Yet how much of its total investment capital is used to benefit the UK economy?

The City uses its money to make money and its importance is reflected in its daily results being posted on the BBC. But, to be honest, the BBC has nothing else to show. Britain's balance of trade results are so poor that they actually drag all of the country's other economic indicators down with them. It might be better if Britain stopped engaging in trade altogether. But if we didn't import on such a massive scale, our shops would have very little to sell to us and the important retail sector, a major pillar of the economy, would collapse. Britain is certainly a large economy but it is fundamentally internal in nature and neither dynamic nor particularly stable, as we saw during the most recent 'financial crisis'.



Britain is no longer a profitable exporter in the world market: we run at a loss and have done for almost 30 years with no sign of that trend being reversed. Britain, in terms of trade, is now a branch economy. My question therefore is simply this: what kind of beneficial trading deals can Britain make beyond the European Union?

Before I finish, a brief note on Scotland whose 'government' is very keen to remain in the EU at all costs. Statistics issued by the Scottish Government show that in Scotland new business start-ups consistently lag behind the UK average by 15-20%. Even with oil and the export of specific products, the underlying trend in Scotland is fundamentally stagnant because fewer people in Scotland even consider starting a business. They prefer to wait for someone to employ them, including the state. Scotland remains a branch economy within what is now a branch economy.

Overall, the simplistic nationalist idea that countries can be 'taken back' depends entirely on the health of their economies and on who now owns them. Without taking that into consideration, all thoughts of independence are simply fog-bound political theatre. Oh, and I haven't even mentioned the onrushing Trans-Atlantic Trade and Investment Partnership treaty.

# How is the moral vacuum to be filled?

Carol Craig

2016

Day after day, explanations for the Brexit vote multiply. I agree that many Leave voters rejected globalisation. I accept that what united many disillusioned working-class voters in the north with older, backward-looking, shire Tories were socially conservative views. But that apparent consensus masks quite different motivations people had for voting Leave.

Some Leave voters were rejecting the materialist, market-driven values which have overrun our lives since the 1980s. This value system elevates money, stuff, appearances and fame. These things crowd out other values. Commitment to community, family, friends or work colleagues. Feelings of personal fulfillment such as job satisfaction. The sense of personal integrity which flows from living according to principles or values.

Modern-day economists are the high priests of materialism. They see human beings simply as economic actors motivated by their own self-interest. For them, growth is God. Nothing, neither tradition nor the damage to people's current lives, should stand in the way of what Joseph Schumpeter called 'creative destruction': capitalism's constant need to innovate.

The hand of market economics is everywhere. It subtly affects our language. We are consumers even of public services rather than citizens. Decades of psychological research has shown that people are intrinsically motivated. Yet our materialist perspective assumes that top managers will only do a good job if they are awarded bigger and bigger bonuses. We used to think education was about more than a route to career success and higher earnings.

Religious organisations and the labour movement once challenged materialism by emphasising alternative values such as solidarity. In today's media-dominated world, these voices have been reduced to a whisper. In every aspect of life, money doesn't just talk. It roars.

The casualty of rampant materialism is not just the public realm. Individuals too suffer. Countless studies have shown that the more people pursue materialist values the worse their well-being and mental health. This is true for both children and adults.

As a result of my book *The Great Takeover: How materialism, the media and markets now dominate our lives*, I've talked to thousands of people about these issues. There is a deep and widespread disenchantment with these values. Yet that

disenchantment rarely finds expression in politics or the media. Unless they are involved in the environmental movement or some religious groups, there is little opportunity for people to talk about the negative effects wrought by materialist values.

A few years ago, I ran a workshop for people training to be care workers, mainly working-class men in their 30s, 40s and 50s. As I outlined the essence of materialist values, one said: 'Welcome to our lives and it's shite'. They described lives increasingly dominated by getting the latest mobile phone or pair of trainers. When asked to discuss and report back on why materialist values undermine well-being, they filled four pages of flipchart paper. One line read: 'You never have enough, you're never good enough and you never get there'. They felt they lived in a moral vacuum. They worried about the impact it was having on their children. They are right to do so.

Despite growing prosperity, children in the UK have very poor well-being. A few years ago, Professor Agnes Nairn undertook a comparative study of children and family life in the UK with Spain and Sweden – two countries with high child well-being. The study paints a picture of parents in the UK (but not Spain and Sweden) spending long hours working and commuting so they can buy their children lots of stuff. This is in part to assuage their guilt as absent parents. It's also because they think their kids will lose out and be bullied if they don't have the right gear. Young people sitting alone in their bedroom with all the latest technology is a peculiarly UK experience. Many people from elsewhere in Europe who have settled here tell me of their surprise at what passes for family life in the UK and how we treat our children. Ironically, given Brexit, we have much to learn from our European neighbours about how to raise healthy children. Inevitably, it involves putting materialist values in their place.

Most of the commentary in the UK on Brexit assumes that many traditional working-class folk voted Leave because they weren't getting enough of the cake. This is simplistic. Many want more and better jobs for themselves and their children. They want access to better housing and public services. They quite rightly want higher wages so they don't have to struggle to get by. But many are suspicious of the cake itself. They think it's simply more of the same unhealthy fare.

Some commentators focus on the idea that Leave voters were not prepared to believe experts. But many voted Leave despite the possibility of financial loss. Not because they had nothing left to lose. But because they wanted to reject a value system totally based on money. They didn't agree with the idea that only money matters. I suspect most of the men in my workshop contributed to the one million Scottish votes for Leave.

If they were rejecting the narrow, financial calculations of the experts and giving two fingers to money, what alternative values were they asserting? For many working-class Brexit voters, their alternative value was loyalty – loyalty to their community and way of life which they believe is threatened by globalisation. Of course, some Leave voters are bigots and racists. But they are the minority. Rightly or wrongly, many Leave voters consciously put their Britishness, and spurious 'national sovereignty', ahead of their own self-interest. How else can we explain Nissan car workers in Sunderland voting, *en masse*, for Brexit?

Older Conservative voters in the shires are also harking back to another time – a world they liked better. One more predictable, slower moving and based on what they remember as better values. Much has been made of the selfishness of older voters who didn't think about the effects Brexit would have on their children. Since their personal finances could buffer them in uncertain times, they could also afford an 'I'm all right Jack' mentality. I've little doubt there was real thoughtlessness and naivety in their actions. But I also believe many genuinely wanted to get back to a world which they thought would be better for their offspring.

Much has been made of the fact that one of the main divides in this referendum campaign was that Leave voters were on average less educated than Remain voters. We all suffer from the negative effects of materialism. However, the better-educated can mitigate its effects more easily through access to the arts and exotic travel and less exposure to materialism's junk culture.

Arron Banks, the funder of UKIP, asserts that one reason the Remain campaign failed is because it kept talking about facts rather than emotional reasons for staying in the EU. But we need to reframe this: Remain didn't just talk facts, it fought an economic campaign. For example, when it talked about the uncertainty Brexit would create, it focused on financial markets, trade deals and how business doesn't like uncertainty. It didn't point out how stressful and psychologically damaging this uncertainty would be for individuals and communities. In the big debates, Remain hardly mentioned the peace dividend Europe has enjoyed since European collaboration and solidarity first crystallised in the 1950s.

Of course, Leave argued that, in the long-run, Britons would be economically better off by leaving the EU. It also fought a very nasty campaign, using foreigners and immigration to play on people's fears. But there was something novel about its continual emphasis on sovereignty and repeated calls to 'take back control'. This control is illusory – ordinary people have at best a chance every five years to exert minimal control over our political system. But that mantra had a freshness about it because it wasn't economic. It wasn't politics as usual.

While I think that some voted Leave in part to reject our money-oriented way of

life, and agree with that sentiment, I don't think it was a wise move. I voted Remain.

The huge boost to materialistic values in contemporary times resulted from the 'market triumphalism' unleashed by Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan in the 1980s. Britain and the USA consequently embarked on what Edward Luttwak calls 'turbo-capitalism'. This gets its charge from privatisation, financial deregulation, low taxes for the rich, poor wage rates for workers and deregulation of the labour market. As the philosopher Michael Sandel points out, this market philosophy has not been bounded by notions of right and wrong. As a result, it 'has exacted a heavy price: it has drained public discourse of moral and civic energy, and contributed to the technocratic, managerial politics that afflicts many societies today'. As we've seen, these ideas are particularly toxic as we all vie with one another for money, power and fame.

Far from putting a break on the rise of a materialist, market-driven culture, Brexit looks set to usher in even more of the same. It has put the right-wing – the very people who unleashed these forces – into the ascendancy. *Times* columnist and Remain supporter, Danny Finkelstein, argued on the eve of the referendum that any post-Brexit shock to the UK economy was likely to result in policies favourable to business, including lower wages. Within a week of the referendum, George Osborne proposed further cuts to an already shrinking rate of tax on company profits. Lord Lawson told the House of Lords that Brexit meant the government could 'finish the job which Margaret Thatcher started'.

Steadying the economy, negotiating our way out of the EU and into different trade deals, and repealing EU laws will dominate our political landscape for at least a decade. This will make it even less likely that the political class will engage with the type of issues I've raised here.

There is a desperate need to talk about the toxic values which underpin our market-driven society and undermine our individual and collective well-being. For some, a Leave vote was a *crie de coeur* on this very issue. Sadly, I suspect the Brexit they have secured will make matters worse.

# The absurd idea that Scottish values are different

Andrew Hook

2016

What brought about the Brexit own goal? Increasingly clearly, much more than a protest against the EU. We've all seen the analysis of the vote that reveals a very real gap between Remainers and Leavers in terms of age, education, income, geography and nationality. But to my mind, the outcome was the result of an even wider, more all-encompassing divide – between what, in shorthand, can be called the haves and the have-nots.

That is why I agree with *The Observer's* editorial of 26 June which argued that towards the end of the campaign it was almost not about the EU at all: 'it was about alienated voters, fractured communities... and the seething, hitherto repressed anger of so many people who felt they have been left behind'.

Let me try to defend this view by charting aspects of my own personal history. In 1970, I left Edinburgh for Aberdeen – arriving just at the time when the North Sea oil boom was, as it were, picking up steam. Having sold a quite large, top-floor flat in Edinburgh's new town for under £5,000, I was shocked by rocketing house prices in Aberdeen. (It was then that I made the unforgettably stupidest remark of my life – announcing angrily that I'd never pay over five figures for a house...) But, at this time, Aberdeen was still largely a complacently provincial city. It was impossible to find a greengrocer stocking courgettes, aubergines, or globe artichokes, and when I complained that a local shop was out of cream, I was told that was because there was little call for it. All this was about to change. And by 1980, when I left for Glasgow, the influx of newcomers had transformed Aberdeen into the prosperous international city that until recently it remained.

Glasgow in 1980 was very different. With two of us in permanent, full-time academic jobs, I was able to buy quite a large house in the West End – and send our children to Glasgow High School. But it was obvious that Glasgow was less prosperous than Aberdeen. I remember being particularly struck by the number of old cars that were on the roads – old bangers we used to call them.

That recollection has come to mind frequently in recent times because of the sharp contrast it provides with the situation today. Now the streets of the West End often seem crowded with BMWs, Mercedes, Volvos, Audis, Porsches and other expensive cars. In a residential area near St Bride's church, where I sometimes park, I frequently see no fewer than three Bentleys. Then Byres Road, the West End's

main shopping street, apparently has along its length as many as 26 locations where one can have one's morning coffee. The street's supermarkets now include the up-market Waitrose as well as Marks and Spencer's and Tesco. There are many boutique-style shops – including one selling balsamic vinegar that costs more than champagne. A branch of the major bookstore Waterstone's has recently opened. In other words, there is plenty of evidence that in and around Glasgow's West End there are plenty of people who are doing well and have money to spend.

But – and it's a very big but – that is only part of the story. Byres Road also has a surprising number of charity shops selling cut-price clothes and so much more. Waitrose and Tesco invite us to buy items to be sent on to the food banks across the city. *Big Issue* sellers are much in evidence – and then every day, more troublingly, one passes on the pavement all too many of the destitute, with signs saying things like 'I am hungry please help me'. In other words, the evidence of wealth I've been providing co-exists with evidence of extreme poverty and deprivation.

Perhaps I'm over-dramatising the gulf between the two, but the point remains that across the UK from at least the financial crash of 2008 – some would say from the time of Mrs Thatcher – the gap between those in our society doing reasonably well, and the huge number whose standard of living has been declining, has widened alarmingly. Given this situation, it is hardly surprising that millions of people – having read in their newspapers, and been told repeatedly by the leaders of the Leave campaign, that we'd all be better off if we took back control and escaped the clutches of the unelected, faceless bureaucrats of Brussels – decided to give it a try. After all, what had they to lose?

How then, I'll be asked, did a substantial majority of Scots decide not to give it a try? The answer I believe is the success of the SNP. Particularly in the most recent General Election, the SNP persuaded vast numbers of former Labour supporters that it, not Labour, was the party that recognised their plight and knew how to resolve it. Escape from the clutches of Westminster and all will be well. Westminster was the problem – certainly not Brussels. This was why in the referendum our SNP Government supported the Remain campaign and persuaded most of its supporters to do the same. To my mind, however, this success leaves the party with a problem that remains unresolved and could in the future turn out to be damaging.

The Scottish National Party's defining mission has always been the breaking of the union between Scotland and England. At the same time, the party remains committed to the maintenance of Scotland's position within the European Union. I have never understood how these two goals are intellectually compatible with each

other. If it is perfectly acceptable for Scotland to cede a substantial degree of sovereignty over its economy, its environment, its human rights legislation, its fishing rights, and other areas, to the 27 states in the 40-year-old European Union, why is it unacceptable for Scotland and its devolved parliament to cede similar powers to the government of a union which has endured for over 300 years? What is it about the rest of the UK that makes a continuing union with it less attractive than entering into a union with 27 states, some of which have some links with Scotland but many others do not?

Writing in favour of Scottish independence now, in a recent contribution to the *Scottish Review*, Bill Mitchell argues that the answer is a basic clash of values. 'The events of the last fortnight,' he tells us, 'represent tangible evidence that our societies have different values'. This strikes me as a quite extraordinary assertion. No doubt there are individuals in Scotland and England who have different values, but to suggest that Scottish society as a whole espouses a set of values alien to those of England as a whole, is absurd.

Are we seriously being asked to believe that the thousands of Scots who live in England – and the thousands of English people who live in Scotland – have different values from those of their next-door neighbours? And in the context of breaking up one union while embracing another, I wonder whether these alleged 'Scottish' values – rejected by England – are shared by all 27 states of the European Union?

Having been in power now for nearly a decade, the SNP Government has done little to improve the living standard of our country's have nots. It has chosen rather to enhance its appeal to middle-class supporters. And one of its ways of doing so is by embracing Europe. In the longer-term, however, will its increasingly disillusioned radical supporters be impressed by a decision to maintain a union with an unreformed Europe? Somehow, I doubt it.



# The decision should be rejected

Anthony Seaton

2016

## Monday 20 June

Referendums, referenda, whatever. Let's have no more of these gerunds. I am writing three days before the vote. A week ago, driven to distraction by the obvious motives of power-hungry politicians and the self-interest of business people, and infuriated by the unthinking aggression of mostly middle-aged members of the public on television interviews, I posted a short appeal on Facebook warning of the past consequences of demagoguery as now exemplified by Trump, Johnson and Farage. Such stupidity, speaking of simple solutions to complex problems, appeals especially to the unthinking; it rouses rabbles and has led in the past to the rise of dictators, notably in the 1930s. The next day, Jo Cox MP, one of the very best of human beings, was brutally murdered by someone allegedly calling out 'death to traitors'. I wept on hearing the sickening news.

Even in our flawed democracy, we still elect most of our politicians (not those in the House of Lords) including those in the European Parliament. We have a say at all three levels in Europe and still, believe it or not, make our own laws and strongly influence those emanating from the EU. Our regulations on workers' rights and the environment are wholly beneficial to most of those who threaten to leave Europe, excluding those who wish to exploit their employees. Europe, in my personal experience, has moderated the right-wing inclinations of successive recent UK Governments in these areas. But many people who otherwise support Labour seem not to understand this. Why not? There is a pretty simple explanation: the power of popular newspapers to present one side of the story, combined with a loss of trust in politicians following repeated scandals and the knowledge that they speak with forked tongues, thanks to the activities of so-called spin-doctors. Given a politician or *The Sun* and *Daily Mail*, most people seem to believe the paper.

I shall shortly have endured four referendums and have had four too many. These last two have been the worst; both have been extremely divisive and resulted in aggression and ill feeling. Anyone who openly supported the In option in the Scottish referendum will have come across the aggressive behaviour of the cyber-nats and accusations of being unpatriotic. The unthinking hostility of ordinary people supporting Out in the present one is obvious to all who watch television. For the next three days, I shall only watch football, in which I have no interest, on

television, and pay no attention to politics on the radio or other news media. I am praying for a victory for good sense and a strong UK in Europe.

### **Saturday 25 June**

I did listen to the radio and heard nothing about the important issue of consequences, just blind optimism or pessimism. Waking at 4am yesterday I heard the awful news and realised with dread that the snake-oil salesmen and quacks had really managed to sell their poison to the population and the poor, the disaffected, and those with poor education and weak abilities to reason had swallowed it.

Later, it became apparent that fewer in Scotland, unsurprisingly, had been gullible. It took me a day to be able to think clearly. Enormity is a commonly misused noun nowadays, but this has been an enormity enacted on the victims of successive British Governments since Thatcher by the latest and least impressive of these, a deceitful attempt to switch blame for austerity onto Europe. I heard Johnson, plump and plummy but looking anxious and bedraggled, claim that we would remain part of Europe, united and heading to a glorious future. Part of Europe, united? How deluded can this man be?

My friends in England and Wales emailed me wishing that they lived in Scotland. Members of my multinational family discussed the value of their other passports or considered applying for the nationalities of their non-UK parent. As Maynard Keynes said, when the facts change it is acceptable to change one's mind. I decided that, in spite of my previous strong opposition to Scottish independence, I would now vote for it if given the opportunity and, on cue, Nicola Sturgeon announced that she would be doing so. So maybe there is a way ahead for us.

I left Scotland on the 24th for a short holiday in the Isle of Man, my wife's county. Is there any benefit to Manx nationality? Maybe Tynwald has some special agreement with the EU? Apparently, my friends told me, they have an agreement with the UK that gives them access to the EU on our terms and that they will lose this when we leave. No-one asked them to take part in the referendum, but they would like to join Scotland in a bid for remaining. And what about Northern Ireland? They returned a Remain vote like us; is there a case for the Q-Celtic nations remaining in the EU? Then there is London, the most cosmopolitan city in the world with 50% of its population from elsewhere.

Is there any hope? The reality of what they have done is quickly dawning on the people who voted Out. There is no longer a need for the BBC to appear impartial. The newspapers who proclaimed a glorious regaining of sovereignty and independence will have to confront the fact that they have promoted to power a bunch of power-hungry rich men, even less sympathetic to the condition of the

poor and the provision of a welfare state than those they replaced, and have ushered in a period of economic decline to make life even more difficult. It is already apparent that those who pressed for a referendum haven't a clue how to proceed. I suspect a second referendum tomorrow would produce a different result but, of course, that won't happen. England is staring into the caldera of a volcano that may erupt and result in revolution when the people realise what they have been sold.

I expect that we shall be able to jump into our independent Scottish lifeboat but I retain a great affection for the country of my birth, the one that afforded professional opportunities to my Glaswegian great-grandfather and allowed his escape from the slavery of the loom. The death of Great Britain after 300 years is a tragedy. Perhaps, just perhaps, there is a way out. At the last General Election, we voted for our Westminster representatives. A large majority of us voted for MPs who did not have any intention of holding a referendum on Europe, a matter of no real interest save to a small rump of disaffected Tory MPs.

Since the removal of Charles I, parliament has been de facto sovereign in England. Surely our representatives should debate the practical issues arising from the referendum result and vote on whether or not to accept the choice of the people. I recall that some decades ago, when capital punishment was abolished, there was a debate as to whether there should be a referendum and it was decided that our elected representatives should decide for us; a referendum then (and probably still now) would almost certainly have resulted in retention of execution. We elect MPs and MSPs to decide on these difficult issues in the interests of the nation and in light of all the expert information that they can acquire.

In putting us in the position we are in, in having a referendum to solve a difficulty in one political party without doing the classical risk assessment that the civil service once performed, our MPs and our disastrous Prime Minister have signally failed the United Kingdom. They should be given one last chance to show courage and reject the decision of the masses for the good of the nations that constitute it. History will be their judge.

# I'm glad my dad isn't around

Catherine Czerkawska

2016

Back in the late 1940s, when a number of Polish refugees were living and working in Leeds, somebody remarked to my mum that she thought 'they should send all those Poles back where they belong. Don't you agree?'

'Well, no,' said my mum. 'Seeing as how I've just married one.'

I should add that my late mum, undoubtedly working class, half-Yorkshire and half-Irish, could be more than a little forthright when she chose. I've been thinking about this scenario a lot over the last few days. My dad, who had lost everything in the war, including his own father, his half-sister, an aunt, several uncles – and his home – was the least bitter man I ever knew: kindly, clever, wise.

In the years since he died, I've lost count of the people who have told me that he touched their lives in positive ways. But he always maintained that extreme racism and hatred could happen anywhere, at any time, that it was not the vice of any one nation or group of people (and he did not exempt his own nation) but rather a result of circumstance and venality: people choosing to ignore or downplay uncomfortable truths, while the deprived, the angry, the vicious, the out-of-control or the simply deluded were egged on, given permission by those with quite different and mostly self-seeking agendas.

He was right. The hideous sparks of UK racism we are seeing publicised on news and social media could, if not robustly extinguished right now, be fanned into a conflagration that will engulf us all. And when those leavers who believed the lies that quitting the EU would mean control of all immigration, realise that they have been deceived, things can only get worse. It feels as though we are drifting and the rocks are looming.

Never, in more than 60 years on this planet, have I woken each day with such a feeling of disorientation, such worry about the future of our children and their children. Somebody said it feels like a bereavement and it does. This is not to compare the incomparable. A bereavement is uniquely personal, a sort of mental and spiritual car crash. But the sensations are oddly similar: that feeling of waking to the sense of oppression and depression, the spiralling out of control, the way in which you make a space in your day for other things only to have the grim reality forced on you yet again.

'Why is everyone being so hysterical and melodramatic,' asked a writer of some

distinction on Facebook last week. To which one can only reply, don't you feel it? And if you don't, what's wrong with you? Don't you hear the collective howl of decent people who think that this was not so much democracy in action as a subversion of the democratic process; that great fat lies were told and unbelievably believed, that those people suggesting we keep calm and carry on because everything will be just fine – while little Polish girls are being called vermin and once more told to 'get back where they belong' – are fooling themselves, even if they can't fool the rest of us.

Meanwhile, those who should be tackling this, seeking to extinguish the flames, parade across our television screens with no answers, no leadership, no comfort to give. The only person showing real leadership – and I admit that I've not been one of her natural supporters – is Nicola Sturgeon. In all fairness, she is in a better position than most to offer leadership but she certainly seized the day. Good for her. Most admirably, in my opinion, the very first thing she did was to reassure EU people working in Scotland that they were and are our friends, that they are welcome here. It was a strong statement and it was surprisingly effective. 'I want to take the opportunity [...] to speak directly to citizens of other EU countries living here in Scotland – you remain welcome here, Scotland is your home,' she said.

Last weekend, we had visitors, including a German friend who has studied, lived and worked in Scotland for some years now. What may have felt to us like an admirable but obvious speech was, he told us, powerfully reassuring. We have had nothing so authoritative from Westminster, and when something did come, it was too little and too late.

As we sat over a meal, a mixture of all nationalities and none, Scottish, English, Irish, German and Polish, it occurred to me again as it has many times over the past years, how much my dad would have loved it that his grandson felt like a European and had close friends from many countries that two or three generations ago had been all but destroyed by old enmities. Whatever Scotland can do to retain and maintain this – and who, if not the Scots – then whatever difficulties may lie ahead, it'll be worth it.

Meanwhile, I can't help feeling, with the protectiveness that all loving daughters feel for their dads, so glad that my dad isn't around to see what's happening.

# A bloody horrible place

Keith Aitken

2018

The short version is that the Brexit process left me feeling so much like a stranger in my own country that I decided to become one, and left. The long version, which follows, is slightly more convoluted, but not fundamentally different.

A little over two months have passed since I closed down my successful business as a freelance journalist and facilitator, sold the lovely house in Colinton that had been our family home for 30 years, consigned our possessions to storage, sale or disposal, and moved with my wife into the tiny flat in Montpellier that we had bought as a pied-a-terre and holiday retreat five years ago.

The truth of the matter is that we always hoped some day to retire to south-west France... just not yet. We are only in our early 60s. My business, having survived the years of economic adversity, had lately been going like the clappers. I was writing as well as I ever have, so far as I could tell; and enjoying it too. Our first grandchild was enchanting us in Scotland, and a second was on the way.

But our plans, like so many things of wider importance, were thrown into disarray by the imbecility of Brexit. We simply did not know what the British Government would negotiate on free movement, or residency, or reciprocal healthcare and pension rights, because government itself showed no sign of knowing what it wanted to negotiate. A hard Brexit is still not impossible. Therefore, it made sense to start getting dug in here in France as soon as possible.

Squaring up to these inconvenient practicalities has been made easier by the conviction that Brexit Britain will be a bloody horrible place: insular, boorish, incurious, illiberal, kleptocratic, narrow-minded, baleful, broke, and draping its America-lite reality with fantasies of empire and Blitz. A place where every day is the *Last Night of the Proms*. Put out more flags? Goodbye to all that.

Britain stubbornly defines itself, and sadder still everyone else, by harking back three-quarters of a century. Just look at the history bays in the bookshop (or at any issue of the *Daily Mail*). Set aside the yards of royal trivia, and most of the rest is about 1939-45. The French may airbrush their wartime history but, like the rest of continental Europe, they are pretty scrupulous about distinguishing in conversation between Nazis, who were then, and Germans, who are now: and they are more interested in the latter than the former. In Britain, it is thought witty to deny the distinction.

Pointers to what lies ahead were also manifest in the dismal referendum campaign of 2016. Neither side excelled in truth or logic, but it hardly mattered, because the moment immigration entered the discussion all rationality departed. It may creep back in years to come as skill shortages cripple public services and make staple industries unviable, but I wouldn't bet on it.

Like many people, I once harboured hopes that Scotland might find its own route to safeguarding the decent civic values that it habitually proclaims. But it is not to be: at least not yet.

And actually, those feelings of alienation first surfaced at that other referendum, in 2014. I would not have believed that a strategy bent so remorselessly on demoralisation, on telling people in Scotland that they weren't up to nationhood, could succeed, even with the connivance of a once-trusted Labour Party. For this time-served observer of Scottish affairs, it just didn't compute.

France computes. It is not perfect: for perfection, try Switzerland, and good luck. But after years of visiting regularly it has come to feel increasingly like home, even as Britain felt decreasingly so. I am getting to understand its culture in a way I can no longer fathom my own. The best way to explain it is that the French seem to care about many of the same things I do, and Britain no longer does.

They care how things look and taste and sound. They do not regard aesthetics as effeminate, nor ignorance as heroic. They are just as happy discussing art or politics or philosophy as they are discussing sport, which they enjoy very much but do not confuse with news. They admire celebrity, but expect it to reflect some degree of achievement.

They can have a good time without getting bloated and spoiling everyone else's good time. Their manners are not adjusted to the social standing of the recipient. They do not strew litter wherever they go (dogshit, alas, is another matter), they treat their children as apprentice adults and expect them to behave accordingly, and they address the elderly with respect.

They refuse to accept that national life exists only in the capital city, they work to live not the other way around, they want more from foreign policy than the privilege of writing 'ditto' on US State Department press releases, and they believe that tradition should inform not pre-empt change. They have noticed that the Second World War ended some months ago, and are happy to move on.

So far at least, and in defiance of the all-too familiar stereotypes, they have also been friendly and welcoming to us. They are curious about Brexit – bemused would be a better word – but not resentful, nor unduly concerned. Their concept of, and commitment to, Europe is undiminished by Britain dropping out of the picture. Which is how I feel too.

# Who could lead a national government?

R D Kernohan

2018

I hope it will not come to pass, for I hope it will not be necessary. The Conservative Party may yet see that national and party interest both require as soft a Brexit as the EU's surly obduracy will now allow as well as a smooth transition. But British Government, opposition, business, and public opinion have to consider the hitherto 'unthinkable' prospect of a departure without a real deal.

They should also turn their minds to another prospect still unlikely but conceivably necessary: the possible need for some kind of national or cross-party government to carry an unsatisfactory and unpopular settlement through parliament, if Theresa May cannot do so, or to lead the country past the immediate aftermath of any 'no-deal' departure which fulfils some of the current prophecies of woe and confusion.

I do not mean a coalition as understood in the days of Cameron and Clegg, or even the more glorious ones of Churchill and Attlee. For the crisis would not arise from a need to suspend normal party conflict but from a temporary breakdown in a party system which in most matters, other than leave or remain, still expresses reasonably well the national range of social or economic attitudes and preferences. It would, as the 'National Government' of 1931 was at first meant to be, a temporary arrangement with a limited objective, although those entering it would know that there could be long-term, unpredictable, and unintended consequences when politics returned to 'normal'.

Neither do I suggest that such a government could be fully national to the extent the Churchill Government was. Were it to become necessary, it would reflect the way in which one leader of the two great parties has lost the confidence of a vocal, substantial, and sometimes irrational section of her MPs, while the other, quite unsuited to his role, has never been liked, trusted, or approved of by the great majority on his own benches. It would also probably be unable to draw in, though it would have to make an honest attempt, the SNP's neo-Parnellites at Westminster. I fear that even in such a crisis they would still act as mere delegates of a movement obsessed with breaking up the United Kingdom and unable to seek common cause with the rest of the British people. Only the Lib Dems, despite the unhealed scars of coalition, might come in more or less intact.

Nevertheless, it might be possible to create, for a limited time, a powerful



consensus of what, in Tory scuffles long ago, the late Iain Macleod called 'the crucial centre area of British politics'. It would, however, be a pragmatic and empirical centrism, not some clapped-out notion of a 'centre party'. It would include those who reluctantly accept that there is no going back after David Cameron's disastrous referendum, and those who, with equal reluctance, accept that our laws and economics are now so enmeshed with those of the EU that we must for a time thole the penalties of its unhelpful and obstructive attitudes, whether they force us into near-surrender or complete secession.

But I neither want this to become necessary nor underestimate the practical difficulties if it does. Indeed, even to consider the possibility involves an immediate encounter with some serious problems and weaknesses in our present political structures. Who is to lead such a government of rescue or survival and win as wide a consensus as possible? Who could play Attlee, Bevin and Eden to his or her Churchill and who, influential but personally disinterested in power or glory, would rally the backbench and media opinion?

We have not recently produced many such paragons. The shallowness and mean party spirit of so much political debate and the pace of modern controversy, so much of it inconsequential twittering idiocy, does not encourage evolution of elder or even junior statesmanship. The pace of personal political rotation – we must have nearly 20 surviving former leaders or acting leaders of major British parties, plus Alex Salmond – has not added all that much quality to quantity. Nor do we have many men and women of towering prestige in public or business life, but placed outside or risen above party controversy, who could contribute additional prestige, judgement or skills, and prove robust enough to survive a season or two in the political Premier League. Ours is an age of specialisation, and one in which those who talk most loudly of the 'public interest' too often mean their sectional advantage or personal preferences.

But in arguing for contingent consideration of what I hope to be unnecessary and admit would be excruciatingly difficult, I do not concede that the apparently unthinkable is impossible. I have even drawn up a short list of four senior politicians, apart from Mrs May, with the ability to lead a government of national crisis, though immediately rejecting two of them on grounds of character, temperament and previous record.

Of the four, Tony Blair is the only one who has so far shown any inclination to play the role of national redeemer – and even then from a great height. But Blair arouses intense dislike, resentment and distrust, sometimes even hatred. If these liabilities were overcome, there still remains an insuperable objection. He epitomises the arrogant attitudes to European integration which built up British

euroscepticism and which now sustain the rise of populist parties in Europe. David Cameron never rose as high as Blair and has therefore never fallen so far, but he declined the chance, which may have been a duty, to accept the choice he had thrust on the British voters and make the best of Brexit. He ought now to be an elder statesman but isn't.

There remain two possibilities, whose reluctance could only be overcome in a situation calling for desperate remedies: Gordon Brown and William Hague. Both have managed to combine some elder statesmanship with an apparent enthusiasm for retirement. They have their vanities but no dangerous ambitions. Both at the moment would deride any idea of a return to the top and both would have the tiresome formality of finding a way back to the House of Commons. But both have been party leaders and one a Prime Minister. Both have good international connections. Both have been practical and patriotic in their attitude to British interests. And both, though it is a relatively minor point, have a grasp of the sensitivities and realities of the complications caused by devolution within the UK. They can distinguish between some real concerns and much more contrived bluster.

Brown is the more obvious and probably even more reluctant prospect. He is more senior and he commands respect and influence in the main opposition party. Although he has a cantankerous streak, compared to the present Labour leader he is (as Hamlet would say) 'Hyperion to a satyr.' He has the personal integrity that might make it possible for many Labour people to invoke the thought of Attlee's national service and not the ghost of Ramsay MacDonald.

Hague is a good second best or partner, well placed to minimise the disruptive tendencies on either European wing of a party that once called him to such premature leadership, less well placed to draw in so much Labour support but unhampered by personal animosity. In normal conditions, Hague, still on the right side of 60, would just as prematurely settle in with the ageing John Major as one of the few genuine elder statesmen in British politics, but conditions are now far from normal and might get worse.

I hope they don't, and that I am risking speculation that in a year's time may seem far-fetched and fanciful. It will be far better for Theresa May to struggle decently through, backed by a few Labour eurosceptics and demob-happy rebels, and helped by a growing realisation that the qualities required and even welcomed in a lively newspaper columnist or populist mayor don't count for so much in a Prime Minister and party leader. But it is best to be prepared, and to consider how Britain could still rise to a very unhappy occasion that ought to be avoided.

# Most of Britain will never be prepared

Ronnie Smith

2018

I'll tell you right now, I am neither for or against the principle of Brexit. Membership of the EEC and then the EU has been a controversial political issue in Britain for as long as I can remember. The French President, Charles De Gaulle, was always against British membership. Not because he disliked the British, but because he believed that throughout the 1960s the British were not serious about the greater European project. He was right. We have never been serious about the greater European project – of finding a way to stop economically-powerful European countries going to war with each other on a more or less permanent basis.

The British have not cared about any such project since the defeat of Napoleon, after which the management of the continent was left safely in the hands of the Austrian empire through the Congress of Vienna in 1816, allowing us to get on with building our own global empire. Napoleon regarded the British as a 'nation of shopkeepers', borrowing the phrase from Adam Smith. President De Gaulle agreed with him, the point being that the British were unlikely to do or take part in anything that did not turn a profit or protect those profits already being turned. Our commitment to an idea of 'Europe' has always been half-hearted, and our membership of the Community, come Union, since 1973 has always been less than 100%.

My only concern about the 2016 referendum result is that Britain *was* and *is not* ready to leave the EU economic comfort zone. The British economy is in the wrong shape to be leaving a single market. Much of it has become used to EU free trade, and has become rather fat and lazy within it. To enter the global market without the protective custody of the EU, Britain needs a far stronger manufacturing sector and a far more vigorous business culture than it currently has. Britain needs to make money and the country's balance of trade position has remained poor since 1998, even taking financial services into account. This may be my only concern – but it's a very significant one.

The fear that many people share over Brexit comes from Britain's unpreparedness for what comes next. We know that there has never been a plan for Brexit. Even the most die-hard Brexiteers had, and still have, no idea what a post-Brexit Britain can or should look like. Their model appears to be a Britain of 50

years ago. Their motivation seems to be the creation of a renovated business environment in which they and their colleagues and friends can profit. They will deregulate, sell assets and manage investment funds that will take advantage of the new situation. Everyone else will endure some level of discomfort until things settle down.

However, in the age of the information superhighway, this approach seems inadequate to those with even a modicum of education and business experience, no matter how much you dress it up in patriotic drivel. In the past 100 years or so, Britain has had a habit of being completely unprepared for major historical changes that *didn't* comprise commercial advantage.

Britain was not ready for the First World War. The professional Army was not big enough to fight a major land war on the continent, and manufacturing took far too long to start producing the munitions and equipment that were needed to take on the German war machine. The crisis surrounding the provision of large calibre shells had to be resolved by David Lloyd George.

Having borrowed heavily to win and then recover from the First World War, Britain was not prepared for the financial crisis of the 1930. This created an overstretch in resources which rendered the country ill-prepared for the Second World War, with the same problems as before. The war started with Dunkirk, and didn't really improve until the USA and Soviet Union got involved, despite our being at the head of the 'greatest empire ever known'.

We weren't prepared for peace either. The loss of the empire continues to flummox us even now. The Channel tunnel took most of my lifetime to make sense of. The third runway at Heathrow has taken my entire lifetime, and is only now on the verge of resolution. The situation in Ireland has lasted for hundreds of years and is now one of the main stumbling blocks to a settlement of the current Brexit negotiations. Parliament is a mess of unresolvable intra- and cross-party chaos, and the constitutional structure of the UK itself is in permanent turmoil after what was supposed to be the devolution settlement in the late 1990s. Indeed, the Assembly in Northern Ireland has not sat since early 2017, and few people care.

Britain is never prepared and it is therefore not surprising that it isn't ready to leave the European Union. Britain has shown itself, time and time again, to be incapable of a well-organised, unified response to major events, including those initiated by us. Instead, we have seen and continue to see, different regions of the country and sections of its economic community reacting in a fragmented way and in their narrow best interests. This is both the cause and effect of the continuing British malaise.

I was recently in London for the weekend. It has been some time since I have

actually had time to walk around the place in the broad sunshine of a Sunday afternoon and, I must say, I noticed many changes. When I used to work there, during the Thatcher 'revolution', the NatWest tower, the Lloyds building, Canary Warf and the Gherkin, were the headline symbols of corporate power in the city.

Now, looking across the Thames from Shakespeare's Globe theatre, it's a struggle to find the NatWest tower among the cluster of new corporate behemoths recently built or under construction. Then there is the Shard and other new buildings on the south-side of the river – all giving the impression of a global city in a state of permanent growth. Which London is, and has been, since the end of the civil war in the 1640s. There is little fear in this place, rather a sense of absolute belief that cannot be found in any other part of the country.

Except in times of war, Britain has always been the most divided of political and economic constructs, with London at the top in all categories and the far north of the country at the bottom with literally nothing. There has never been a structure created to permit an equitable distribution of economic, political and social resources throughout the country, and I don't expect that to change. Britain is a rather subtle dog-eat-dog kind of society, with the biggest dogs building their kennels in the south-east. As a result, the south-east, including London, is where the benefits of Brexit will be most enjoyed, and we may look no further than Jacob Rees-Mogg for the confirmation and personification of that truth.

In Britain, certain individuals and organisations are always prepared and can smell the profit from change. I expect that Brexit, no matter what it finally looks like, will prove this timeless dynamic once more. The rest of us will be left to muddle through – as usual.

# The UK faces a series of existential challenges

Gerry Hassan

2018

Last week, I attended an event at Dundee University on the ideas and impact of Scottish thinker, Tom Nairn. Many of his books were discussed, including his critique of the monarchy, and the insularity of the British left, but his most important work, *The Break-Up of Britain*, published 41 years ago, seems more relevant than ever as we live through Brexit.

*The Break-Up of Britain* explores the archaic, ossified relic that is the British state; undemocratic, anti-modern and that sees itself as 'the mother of parliaments'. It is also a book in which the state of England is central to this mindset – its gathering unease at events in Europe and the European project, and in which a reactionary English nationalism is emerging, initially around Enoch Powell (who was obsessed with 'sovereignty'), but then taken up by Thatcher, and now by Brexiteers.

Brexit has come as a surprise for some, but it shouldn't have. The UK not only never became a fully fledged signed-up member of the European project, in many places it never even embraced the 'idea' of Europe, choosing to see itself as apart. It never really fully embraced the modern age (i.e. the 20th century) with elements of its elites still living in the age of feudalism.

Brexit did not just occur because of Nigel Farage, Arron Banks and Boris Johnson. The reasons for Brexit lie much deeper in part of the English psyche. A significant part of England, along with Wales, and smaller elements in Scotland and Northern Ireland, never warmed to the idea of Europe. And, as society has changed in recent times with economic dislocation, social flux, the wave of immigration post-2004, and the decline of traditional authority from churches to unions, many people have felt lost and have asked who is looking out for them. It certainly wasn't Blair and New Labour, or Cameron and his smooth Conservatism modelled on the Blair project.

The last two and a half years have revealed unattractive things about the English political imagination. First, there has been the ridiculous language of Tory Brexiteers like Jacob Rees-Mogg, Steve Baker, Nadine Dorries and Boris Johnson. They have talked of the UK as a 'vassal state' and a 'colony' permanently stuck in 'servitude', while comparing the EU to Napoleon, the Soviet Union, and of course, Nazi Germany.

Second, irresponsible sentiment and bad history are also found on the Remain side. The People's Vote campaign for a second referendum has made real headway, but hasn't been helped by the support of Blair and his ex-spin-doctor, Alastair Campbell. The latter seems to have no insight into his role in tarnishing public standards through his media manipulation which came a cropper over Iraq. How else can one explain Campbell going on about 'lying' in public life? In the last week, Matthew d'Ancona in *The Guardian* said Brexit was driven by 'an extremely unpleasant nativism,' and 'Britons who just don't much like people of foreign extraction,' while Andrew Marr stated to Blair: 'The English in particular have never been ruled by anyone else'.

None of the UK political parties have come out well. Theresa May has earned a grudging respect, with opponents talking of her resilience and determination against all odds. But that does not get away from her lack of political leadership. She boxed herself into her current predicament by her Lancaster House speech over Brexit in January 2017 and her 'red lines' – which precluded a Brexit based on the customs union and single market. And subsequently she has failed to come clean on the need for a Brexit compromise, including the way she has presented her Withdrawal Agreement.

The approach of Jeremy Corbyn and Labour has not been better. Corbyn was posted missing in action in the 2016 campaign, and he, or the people running his office, did all they could to undermine the Remain side. Since then, Corbyn has doggedly aided Brexit, seeing an upside in a UK removed from EU restrictions, saying Brexit 'can't be stopped', and keeping the party's position vague. Maybe Labour will come out next week for a second referendum, but Corbyn, the chief supporter of party democracy, has consistently ignored the will of party members: pro-EU, pro-single market and customs union, and *for* a second vote.

There is the bitter aftertaste of the EU referendum. Even more damning than Leave playing fast and loose with the truth, facts and experts, was the issue of its finances. Arron Banks is the biggest political donor in British history with his £8m donations to Leave. But despite numerous fines on Leave and legal rulings that they broke the law, Banks refuses to give a straight answer to the simple question – where did his money come from?

If Brexit had really been about 'taking back control', then the 2016 vote would have resulted in a flurry of proposals for greater democratisation in the UK: to reform parliament, to more effectively hold the executive to account, in how laws were made, and about decentralising one of the most centralised countries in the developed world. They could even have begun thinking about England – the state which fed Brexit.

Not only has this supposed great historic moment of 'taking back control' failed to result in a plethora of ideas to renew democracy, the reverse has happened. There has been the use of Henry VIII's powers to push legislation through parliament, while the UK Government has tried to prevent the Attorney General's full legal advice being published and found itself in contempt of the UK Parliament. It's possible that the 11 December vote won't happen if the government knows that they face massive defeat.

Scotland sometimes seems to think it is immune from this malaise. Brexit has posed big questions for Scottish politicians and the SNP; in the event of a hard Brexit it makes independence more messy, with a potential hard border between Scotland and England. The campaign for a second Brexit referendum has also posed problems for the SNP, with senior figures such as Alex Neil and Kenny Gibson concerned that such a campaign could undermine the cause of independence and winning a second Scottish vote. They worry that it could create a politics in which those who lose do not accept the result and call for a re-run – something which could be used in the aftermath of a pro-independence victory.

This then is our future. Constitutional wrangling over Brexit for decades. In Scotland, there is no easy escape clause because all we can do is work out if we want our own special terms of divorce. For some people this is the defining issue – whether it is 'our' divorce – but it offers up the prospect, either way, of years of acrimony.

There is little prospect of this ending well for the UK. What we can see is the damage that can be inflicted by an unenlightened, defiantly anti-modern nationalism obsessed by a Britain and England that never really existed. The dogmatists of the Tory eurosceptic right have conducted a long guerilla campaign since the days of Powell, and have finally made the Tory Party in their image: a party of different shades of Brexit which finds political compromise with our European neighbours problematic.

This is a geo political and territorial set of crises of the UK: one which raises questions about where Britain sees itself in the world, who it allies with, and how it understands its own nature and character. This is, as many have argued, much more serious than Suez and 1956, and is potentially the most serious constitutional crisis since the inception of Great Britain in 1707.

Underlying this, is the fact that the 'idea' of Britain is exhausted, and in particular, the historic Conservative and Labour visions of Britain: one traditional and bringing the working classes into the system on the elite's terms, and the other bringing the people into the system to change it.

This brings us back to Tom Nairn and *The Break-Up of Britain*. This understood



that the UK would face a series of existential challenges driven by capitalism, globalisation and Europe, that would increasingly fragment the union, taking Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland in a different direction from England. Forty years on, we are still waiting for English left-wingers to speak about an English politics. We have paid a high price for their unwillingness to talk about this: an abdication which has aided the likes of Farage and Johnson to stoke an English rage.

A salutary thought to end on. The UK voted for Brexit without much debate or understanding of what the EU is, and the UK will, as things stand, leave the EU with many still defiantly ignorant of Europe and the UK's relationship with it. And such wilful ignorance has only strengthened a politics of little Englanderism and reactionaryism, to the cost of all of us.

# Does Britain still thrive in its darkest hour?

Ronnie Smith

2019

I tend to see the excruciating Brexit process as a national collective physical and mental breakdown, the result of the accumulation of many factors over a period of 104 years. Brexit is the arterial sclerosis of Britain's political economy. The bloodstream of the nation has been coagulating since 1914 and we have eventually exhausted all available treatment.

Brexit has become something to observe rather than a political event to which one might, as in the past, usefully offer a tuppence worth. Sure there have, and will continue to be, plenty of tuppences injected into or otherwise consumed by the body of the patient, but they will become stuck in the narrowing veins. Our social media has contributed mightily to this clogging up with tuppences, including the increasingly anxious ranting of Anna Soubry, the cold but vapid cynicism of Jacob Rees-Mogg, the utterly pointless but laudable common sense of Nicola Sturgeon, the anonymous mother of someone's Twitter acquaintance who believes 'No Deal' to mean that Britain will not be leaving the EU, and the equally anonymous guy on LBC who vehemently wants to leave so that we can keep our iconic three-pin plug.

Yes, Brexit is a veritable festival of Britain, stuffed to the rafters with exhibits of every timeless British eccentricity and passionately drained of all useful intellectual content.

The Prime Minister's current strategy to let the blood flow once more and break the deadlock seems to have been to give everyone time, over the Christmas holiday, to consider the consequences of rejecting her proposed deal with the EU. So, for her the choice is between either her profoundly reviled agreement or sailing out into the unprotected commercial oceans of the world without any kind of understanding with our ex-trading partners and no new agreements with anyone else. Mrs May offers us partly-clothed or entirely naked in her vision of Britain's future.

Apparently incapable of any form of reasoned discussion, the Prime Minister instead threatens the entire country with vast levels of spending to prepare the government for the realities of 'No Deal', the horrors of shortages, the return of rationing, the catastrophic collapse of our public services, the loss of countless jobs in failing industries and unaffordable services, the cutting of our energy supplies and the blocking of our roads at customs posts and, the *pièce de résistance*, the return of civil war in Ireland.

Clearly all of these things are enough to 'frighten the French', as my mother used to say – a phrase concocted at the time of the Napoleonic wars. She also used to say, when there was a downturn in good fortune, that things were 'in a worse state than China', referring to the Middle Kingdom's chaotic period of civil war and invasion by the Japanese. And she would be right on both counts if we include drones at our airports and our permanently red balance (or imbalance) of trade. However, I suspect that Mrs May's gamble on her catastrophic worst case scenario might just backfire.

I've read many examples of enthusiastic Brexiteers expressing the belief that the British are at their best when their backs are against the wall, when things simply could not get worse. Mrs May's theatre of horrors could not be any worse than civil war China, and we certainly, by 1815, frightened the French. Now is therefore exactly what many Brexiteers have been waiting for, to awake and once more throw off the yoke of foreign tyranny.

Did we not stand alone against Hitler when Europe surrendered at Dunkirk? (No, because we were still at the head of the greatest empire the world has ever seen at the time. Hardly alone, but never mind.) Did we not endure terrible hardship after the war and retain our position as one of the world's great trading nations? (No, we had to let the empire go, became the sick man of Europe, and were obliged to call in the International Monetary Fund in 1976, not long after confirming our membership of the EEC. But never mind that either.)

The point is that Brexiteers don't fear 'No Deal' because the Somme, Dunkirk, the Blitz, the sinking of the Hood, and the fall of Singapore prove, beyond all doubt, that Britain thrives only in its darkest hour. So bring on rationing, power-cuts, poverty, blood-stained hospital corridors, inoperable airports and impassable motorways, because that is what we have been missing in this barmy, plucky little country of ours since the blessed 'Winter of Discontent'. That is what makes us strong. Indeed, the recent chaos at Gatwick may, with hindsight, be seen as something to cherish. No back has ever been pressed against a higher wall.

Mrs May might have been better to focus more forcefully on the benefits of her deal rather than trying to scare people with the consequences of the alternative. Unless there are *no* benefits in her deal.

# Should we have another EU referendum?

John McGrath

2019

One estimate is that only 26 MPs in the UK Parliament have some kind of STEM qualification. I doubt if the national parliaments figure much better. It is a tragically small number and it means the people are deprived of representation by individuals able to critically and competently assess the scientific validity of their views. Most politicians seem entirely unaware of a concept well-known in physics: indeterminism.

Many a drunk staggering home with eyes near shut will have noticed how the light of sodium street lamps spreads out in patterned lines. What they are seeing is the diffraction of light as it passes through a small gap. It was fully explained mathematically for more than 100 years on the basis that light was a wave and as the ripples passed through the nearly closed eyelids, they spread out just as ripples do when water waves enter a harbour. When Einstein and others came to the inconvenient conclusion that light was a particle, scientists were forced to revisit this well-known experiment and re-explain it in terms of a stream of photons.

The drunk's observation that the light spreads out more as the gap between his eyelids becomes smaller had profound implications. As the gap becomes smaller and the starting point of the particle of light becomes more precisely known, weirdly, the possible path the particle of light might then travel in becomes broader and broader.

For the first time, physicists realised that in some situations, given all the information you can ever gather, it is not always possible to know what will happen and that there is a randomness at the root of all things. Einstein found it difficult to accept, joking that 'God does not play dice', but he accepted in the end that indeed God does and he helped formulate what was to become quantum mechanics. He was a scientist. He could change his mind in the face of new evidence.

The keystone idea of quantum physics – indeterminism – means that given even a God's-eye-view, it is still quite impossible to predict certain things. While physicists have long since accepted indeterminism as a real and inescapable quality of reality, most politicians seem oblivious to it. Politicians predict with a level of certainty that they cannot possibly possess and seem paralysed into fixed beliefs determined by the party to which they belong, the friends that they keep, and their childhood vision of who they think they are meant to be.

The question of whether light is a wave or a particle remains troublesome – 'it depends on how you look at it'. 'It depends on how you look at it' also happens to be the answer to the question whether it is 'more' or 'less' democratic to re-run the EU referendum before Brexit.

It is quite right to say that politicians in a democracy should do what the people tell them to do, but it is a fundamentalist's view that we must always, no matter what the circumstances, make it so, and we know what terrible things fundamentalism can result in. For some doubtless biological reason, an algorithm in the human brain does not allow us to accept that in some situations there is no definitive answer. When pushed, it will settle itself on a Yes or a No, Leave or Remain, even when there is no evidence to decide. It seems involuntary. Whether it is 'more' or 'less' democratic to re-run the EU referendum before Brexit has no definitive answer and it is absurd to claim democracy on either side. The question must be discarded and as scientists we should ask the next question in line. 'What is the best thing to do for the people, whichever is true?'

One side of the root debate – there's no need for introductions here – is concerned about the independence of the state, though they rarely say this explicitly and only speak the word 'independence' in hushed tones, preferring to say 'freedom to choose'. These people think we have lost our independence to the EU and should get it back. The other side, we know who they are too, do not see it that way at all. They think that the UK is independent, or as independent as it can ever be, and are instead concerned about the freedom of the people to mix and live and work where they like without borders, and for people to buy and sell goods to each other as they like.

Neither of these distinct concerns are invalid and the same two concerns are often found sparring in political arenas all around the globe. These multiple and identical boxing matches never end because they are about two understandable desires which happen to be practically incompatible.

The most independent country I ever visited was Cuba. I was only there for two weeks in the early 90s, but in my memory it seems longer. We flew there in a Russian copy of a Boeing 707, built in the 60s I would guess. As the engines fired up, I remember watching the ground crew cover their ears and laugh. After a short stop in Gander Airport to refuel, we climbed back into our seats and noticed scattered here and there about the cabin multiple brown paper packages tied up with string. Later, in the baggage hall, we watched the many odd-shaped parcels being collected by the flight crew. On one parcel the paper was torn and you could see inside it was a stainless-steel kitchen sink. Yes indeed, they had everything *and* the kitchen sink. Other recognisable items included four car tyres ludicrously wrapped in brown paper as if to disguise what they were.

This is not normal cabin baggage. Cuba was creaking under US sanctions at the time which were more or less the result of their insistence on absolute independence. 'Gaun yersel Cuba!' I went there fully believing. The disturbing thought I have revisiting these memories now is just how bad fundamentalist politicians will allow things to get for the sake of their principles.

It was obvious in less than a week that communism was utterly impractical and the quashing of people's natural desire to trade, make money and so give birth to capitalism, required oppressive policing. No-one stopped us going where we wanted though we did bump into the same people suspiciously often. One morning, I opened the door of a beach chalet we were staying in to throw out a cockroach, liberating it rather than killing it, to be surprised by two armed guards standing outside. One grunted an 'Oh' sound and stamped the cockroach flat. Besides the policing, the people themselves did not seem happy with it. When I asked an itinerant guitarist, who wandered around tables in the hotel restaurant if he could play any Victor Jara, he bent forward and whispered in my ear 'I am not a communist'.

The self-organising nature of capitalism that allows people as individuals to open funky cafes and alternative bookshops, and start freezer lorry haulage firms, did not exist in Cuba then and nor did any of these things. You could not get fresh fish in a hotel 20 miles inland. True, they had a decent though dated health service, free schools and high literacy rates, because these things work quite well when centrally organised, and yes, these are the necessities, but can a country not provide these necessities and more?

Besides my disillusionment with communism, I came to another conclusion. That the political independence of a country, or should I say a country's government, does nothing for the freedom of its people. At best, there is no relation, but in many cases I can easily think of others than just Cuba, they are on opposite tracks. A mathematician might say they are sometimes inversely proportional.

No politician in any political party, on any side of the Brexit debate, or any other separatist debate for that matter, seems to be able to bring themselves to say that the loss of political independence is the price you must pay for the freedom of the people. It is such a horrible thing for people of their psychology to admit. People with an almost sexual desire to rule over others. But it is obviously true. If people are to wander where they will and buy goods and houses and have access to health and education and be protected by a legal system that guarantees all this, then 'all this' has to be organised somehow and agreed for the entire area of land in which they want to wander. If one country is not willing to organise and agree with its

neighbour in what will be, even if you do not want to call it that, some kind of common overseeing government, then its people cannot be so free to roam.

If England were to become independent from Scotland and installed a stricter immigration policy, they would be required to erect a hard border to impose it as this would be the only way to stop immigrants entering Scotland, as they would be welcome to, and then moving to England. The independence of the country would come before the freedom of the people as it often does. This basic bit of science is ignored by that breed of politician who desire to independently, exclusively rule over those who they regard as 'their' people – to rule us as if we are some kind of private possession.

Do I think the UK is set to become a Cuba of the north? I doubt we will ever turn to communism, but EU sanctions do not seem so unrealistic to me if some future border dispute turns bad. I've seen it with my own eyes. There is a mind-blowing, but quite well-known, mathematical puzzle about choosing a second time called the Monty Hall problem. A version could be played with three identical Amazon boxes left over from Christmas. A bottle of whisky is placed in one box and a cracker in the other two. The contestant, who obviously does not know which, must choose the box the whisky is in to win it. When they choose one box the host opens one of the others containing a cracker. Given there are only two boxes remaining the question is: Would the contestant be more likely to win the whisky if they changed their mind and picked the other box?

Intuition says no. There are two boxes left so there is a 50:50 chance of being correct no matter which box you choose, but the important lesson here is that intuition is wrong. If the contestant changes their mind and picks the other remaining box, they are more likely to win the whisky. Twice as likely in fact. There are many wonderful explanations online but I think the easiest way to understand it is to realise that when the first choice is made, two of the three boxes contain crackers, so you are most likely to have chosen the wrong box to begin with.

It is a bit like the brain algorithm that makes us choose Yes or No, even when the evidence is impossible to assimilate, only this is something about being unable to understand events connected in time as well as space. When the number of bogus choices is reduced, given the chance, the contestant is more likely to make the correct choice. Does that remind you of anything?

Scientist Robert Millikan spent 10 years of his life trying to disprove indeterminism and the particle theory of light, obtaining results that only served to strengthen it. Curiously, his greatest achievement, measuring the electrical charge of an electron, had to be repeated time and time again to work. Not because it was broken, but because each new result helped 'home in' on the true value. No second

referendum here, we are talking *hundreds* of times over. Millikan was accused of cheating because he disregarded many results he thought spurious, just as politicians would be accused of the same if the referendum was repeated. This is an unfair view.

Whether it is more or less democratic to have a second EU referendum is, to return to that concept from physics that politicians cannot understand, indeterminable. Politicians who keep pointing to this question are only demonstrating that they are interested in imposing *their* truth, not finding out *the* truth. However, there is a valid scientific argument that repeating the EU referendum would increase the likelihood of making the correct choice and improve the accuracy of the attempt to measure the 'will of the people' – if such a thing can ever be measured. A wise, scientific person would want to repeat it and find out if it is as we think.



# Brexit has divided the nation. Here is a rational solution

Anthony Seaton

2019

We live in a representative democracy. We vote for our MPs for personal reasons, based on our understanding of their personalities and the policies of their parties, and we expect them to take account of our collective views, as indicated by the distribution of their constituents' votes. We do not expect them necessarily to take particular account of our individual views, but rather to use their judgement in parliament, based on the policies of their party and their wider understanding of the best interests of the nation and their constituents. I take these statements both to be true and to be acceptable to most people in the UK – a starting point for my argument.

Brexit is an issue that has divided the nation down the middle. It is also divisive of both main parties and of the constituent nations of the United Kingdom. Moreover, it is far more complex than was dreamed of by those people who promoted the idea of a referendum, though perhaps not by the shadowy plutocrats and schemers behind them. But we now know that its implementation will not be as beneficial as was originally proposed and is likely to do economic harm to both the UK and the EU. This includes what appears to be an insoluble problem of a European customs border between the North and Republic of Ireland.

We have reached an impasse that threatens our democracy itself with prorogation of parliament and darker suggestions of extra-judicial action including rioting. A way forward must be found that can meet with general accord and is consistent with representative democracy. Here is a suggestion, to separate Brexit from other pressing political issues. It depends on accepting Europe's previous agreement to postpone the implementation of Article 50 if a good reason is advanced.

A General Election must be held. The dominant issue will be Brexit but all parties would be expected to have a broad programme of policies to deal with the other obvious political and economic problems facing the UK, education, health and social care, taxation and so on. As for Brexit, all candidates will be allowed to make up their minds on whether they are standing on a Remain, no-deal Brexit, or re-negotiated Brexit platform, regardless of the overall policy of their party, otherwise adhering to the relevant agenda.

Some parties, notably the Liberal Democrats, SNP and Brexit, will have a clear view but others, notably Labour and Conservative, may wish to allow their candidates to judge what they consider best for their constituents and campaign on either side. Those individuals standing for re-negotiate would have to have a realistic view of how to achieve this if they are to persuade their constituents, who by the time of the election would be expected to have a clearer view of the consequences than previously.

The views of those elected in such circumstances would be very likely to reflect the majority views of the people in each constituency – the true voice of an informed people. Policy could therefore be settled by our democratically-elected representatives having a free, unwhipped vote in parliament, first for Remain or Leave and then, if Leave wins, between no-deal and re-negotiate. If the latter were to succeed, those elected on this ticket would be presumed to have a realistic plan accepted by their constituents that avoids problems of the border in Ireland and would be acceptable to the EU.

This theoretical argument holds hope of finding a democratic way forward without damaging the constitution. It may prove less divisive for our political parties and the country as a whole than either a repeat referendum or an election in which parties are forced to impose on their candidates a choice that may contradict their better judgement. Brexit is not a party-political issue since it threatens fundamental principles of both left and right. It can only be solved by an informed public, speaking through its elected representatives.

# The tragic road from Baghdad to Brexit

Gerry Hassan

2019

## 1.

Tony Blair, Alastair Campbell, Peter Mandelson and others from the New Labour era, have lately been on our airwaves talking endlessly of the evils of Brexit and the need for a second referendum on Europe. But seldom, if ever, do they publicly reflect on their own disastrous role in fanning the flames which led to the current Brexit debacle.

Blair and Campbell advocated and led the case for the Iraq war – an illegal war based on a campaign of disinformation, deceit and lies, that distorted the processes of government decision-making. In so doing, apart from contributing to untold deaths and misery, as well as Middle East instability, they fed the corrosion of public trust and standards in public life in the UK. And in the years since their original misjudgement and manipulation of facts and evidence, they have shown not one iota of public remorse or understanding of the calamitous nature of their decisions and the damage it caused, not just to Iraq, but to the reputation of government and politics.

We now know that the Iraq conflict was an illegal war. The Attorney General, Lord Goldsmith, gave Blair detailed legal advice on 7 March 2003 which stated that any action without UN approval was illegal; a point he reversed 10 days later with a short legal summary which was published as the UN route became closed off. Subsequently, his original legal ruling was made public revealing his volte face.

Without the Iraq war, public cynicism and distrust would not have reached the incendiary levels it did. Iraq did systematic harm to the progressive case for government and the case for social democratic, interventionist government with the intention of aiding the public good.

This isn't to argue that in recent times public discontent and dismay at party politicians was created by Iraq. Even after the war, we have had the banking crash of 2008 and the parliamentary expenses scandal of 2009, both of which also contributed to a culture of corrosiveness.

## 2.

A pattern can be discerned from the Iraq war and the most calamitous decisions of UK Government in the past century: Munich, Suez and Iraq. All had a UK Prime

Minister – Neville Chamberlain, Anthony Eden, Tony Blair – who engaged in freelancing foreign policy as they thought they knew best about world affairs and bypassed ministers and civil servants, misused intelligence, and deliberately trashed the traditional ways of doing government statecraft.

Neville Chamberlain became Prime Minister in 1937 in an environment of rising international tension and increasing aggressive actions by Hitler and Mussolini. Chamberlain's response was to marginalise the Foreign Office, traditional diplomacy and intelligence reports.

Instead, he engaged in his own private diplomacy, even involving his own family with his sister Ida acting as a go-between with Mussolini, and with trusted sources telling him what he wanted to hear, such as Neville Henderson, UK Ambassador to Berlin, who was close to Hermann Goring. This was the backdrop to Chamberlain's colossal misreading of Hitler, when numerous intelligence sources and eyewitness accounts were warning him of the intentions of the Nazis, which led to Munich in 1938, appeasement and the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia, aided by the British and French.

Before Anthony Eden became Prime Minister in 1955, he had been Foreign Secretary for 10 years in three stints in three different decades, and felt he was well-equipped to judge foreign affairs. Yet, when the Suez crisis emerged and General Gamal Abdel Nasser, Egyptian leader, moved to nationalise the Suez Canal, Eden bypassed Foreign Office channels, undermined Cabinet policy, cherry-picked intelligence, and co-opted individual MI6 officers. This led to the Franco-British invasion of Egypt in collusion with Israel, with Eden lying to the Commons, leading to his subsequent resignation and humiliation.

Tony Blair corroded and trashed conventional decision-making processes in numerous ways but fatally so in relation to Iraq. He politically intervened in and misrepresented intelligence, using it for politically-charged and dishonest public presentation, all of which contributed to the decision to support the illegal war in Iraq. Blair, aided by his chief spokesman, Alastair Campbell, humiliated proper government decision-making, ignored the Cabinet, made key strategic decisions without any proper discussions or evidence, and presided over a dysfunctional Downing Street which ultimately cost the lives of many Iraqis.

Another factor in these cases was the supportive cheerleading role of the right-wing press and papers: the *Daily Mail*, *Daily Express*, *Daily Telegraph* and *The Sun*. The right-wing press supported appeasement, Suez, Iraq and Brexit. As Will Hutton commented this week: 'On big issues there is a cardinal principle. The right-wing media is always wrong'. And it has cost British society and politics dearly.

There is another common thread running from Munich to Suez to Iraq which has relevance to current deliberations. This is the increasing power of a caricatured version of a mythical British past. Munich and appeasement was shaped by painful memories of the horrors of the mass carnage of the First World War. Eden's decision-making over Suez was overshadowed by Munich and the disaster of appeasement of dictators: Eden having resigned as Chamberlain's Foreign Secretary pre-Munich over government policy towards Mussolini.

For Blair and his allies, Iraq was motivated by a fear of appeasement and being seen as soft towards aggressive dictators; as the rationale of war became fraudulent, the spectre of Suez and a disgraced Prime Minister came to prominence. When we come to Brexit, we see the rising tide of nostalgia and a selective retelling of the Second World War and 'our finest hour'. With Britain supposedly 'standing alone' in 1940-41, if we can survive such difficult times, then why should we worry about Brexit?

### 3.

The road from Baghdad to Brexit is a dramatic and tragic one. It has been aided by the lack of closure on events 16 years ago despite Hutton, Butler and Chilcot. This was underlined by the recent release of Gavin Hood's new film *Official Secrets* about the case of whistleblower Katharine Gun (played by Keira Knightley), the story of the US memo asking the UK to spy on UN Security Council members to attempt to persuade them to vote for the Iraq war which Gun put into the public domain in 2003.

Gun was charged under the Official Secrets Act, with the defence of public interest no longer available after the Thatcher Government tightened up the act to make it even more draconian in light of the Clive Ponting case. Civil servant Ponting leaked information that showed that the government had misled the public on the sinking of the Argentinian cruiser Belgrano. He was charged and acquitted, citing a public interest defence. Dramatically, all charges against Gun were dropped on the first day of her trial because the government knew that the Attorney General's original advice ruling the Iraq war illegal without UN approval would become public, which it eventually did.

The story of how we ended up with Brexit and the debacle of the past three years has many influences, one of which has to be the failure of pro-European politicians and public opinion to unapologetically make the case for EU membership and the UK as a fully-fledged European state that was part of the European project.

Paradoxically, as the UK prepares to leave the EU, the country now has a pro-European popular movement with significant reach and an ability to mobilise

people. However, its public figureheads – namely Alastair Campbell, Tony Blair and Peter Mandelson – alongside the Lib Dems, with the SNP and Greens playing a supportive role, have deleteriously affected its impact. Think what its potential could be if it had a different and less discredited leadership.

Brexit is not an accident. It is not an isolated diversion from the road of sanity and proper statecraft. It has happened because our political and public life has failed millions of people to use the forces of government and the common good to transform and make lives better and enhance and liberate people: which is the purpose of progressive politics.

That cause was withering on the vine at the height of New Labour: the scene of the party's greatest electoral triumphs being the point of its most questionable ideological anchoring. The Iraq war was the pinnacle of that and one which destroyed the credo of the Blair-Brown Government, after which even though it unconvincingly won the 2005 UK General Election, it existed in office shorn of the confidence to be radical and social democratic.

The ignominy of the Iraq war leads directly to Brexit, and the leading figures in the former – Blair, Campbell, Mandelson and others – should at least have the small grace, if they cannot apologise, to remove themselves from the public stage and never be heard from again. Gordon Brown, who sees himself as some kind of moral compass, cannot escape the harshest of judgements in this as he chose office over principle and colluded in the disaster that was war.

The story to Brexit has consequences for the present and the future. Iraq led to the diminishing of Britain internationally and domestically, brought the role of governments and politicians into question, and fuelled the populist revolt of Brexit. It contributed to the very visible pulling apart of the union of the UK, tarnishing the idea of Britain while Brexit itself has accelerated these tensions into overdrive, driven by an intolerant, reactionary English nationalism.

When the history books of Brexit are written, pride of place in the pantheon of culprits will be the obvious figures of Nigel Farage and David Cameron. But given equal place and culpability will be Tony Blair, Alastair Campbell and Peter Mandelson, along with others from the New Labour era. And given the human tragedy of Iraq, it is inarguable that their sins are much more heinous, deserving of condemnation and need to be held to account – if not legally, then at least politically, and in the court of public opinion.

# Contributors

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