

radical feminist green

Perspectives

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**COMPASS –
DIRECTION FOR THE
DEMOCRATIC LEFT**

Scotland,
Central America,

GREEN art and
bananas



GOLD?

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EDITORIAL

NEW LEFT, NEW TRICKS

The malaise that now visibly affects the New Labour project, and Tony Blair's position at its head, plus the current state of the left, both within and outwith the Labour Party, are the themes running through two articles in this issue of *Perspectives*.

Gerry Hassan kicks off with an assessment of New Labour, and observes the marginalisation of the left – “The left once had a defining project and story, namely, the idea of socialism.” But this is not a nostalgic call for a return to basic left-wing principles, and Gerry sketches out some areas the left might draw on to construct a convincing political narrative.

The alternative, starkly put, is perhaps a Brown interregnum, but then a David Cameron premiership.

David Purdy follows with a look at one group, largely but not exclusively Labour Party orientated, that has tried to channel the increasing disillusion of many centre-left Labour supporters into the quest for a new direction for the party. The aptly-named Compass recently held a conference in Glasgow for Scottish members. While full membership is open only to Labour Party members, it welcomes others as associates.

On an international theme, we are pleased to welcome an article from Glasgow-based Jan Nimmo, who writes about the intersection of her work as an artist and as a campaigner on Central American issues, particularly the plight of banana workers. Much of what she has seen and done she is able to feed into her work with communities in Scotland.

Participation in demonstrations is one of the abiding memories



This is not a nostalgic call for a return to basic left-wing principles.

(and practices) of many on the left in Scotland. So a novel that has as part of its backdrop the massive protest in Glasgow, when Tony Blair addressed a Labour conference at the city's SECC in the run-up to the war in Iraq, is going to exert a certain pull for many of us. *Demo* is the first novel of Orcadian Alison Miller, who now lives and works in Glasgow. Her book has attracted much interest in the Scottish press and is reviewed here by Democratic Left Scotland's convener, Stuart Fairweather, a seasoned demonstrator himself.

Continuing our focus on Green issues, Patrick Harvie MSP contributes a brief piece on the forthcoming planning bill. The “green thread” he perceives running through it is tokenistic, and offers no real substance – “it's business as usual.”

Lastly, a letter from Ray Newton, in response to the article *Happiness Is ...* in our last issue, asks the big question: Well, what is it all about? (You know, life and all that.)

Can the left convincingly maintain that people *can* co-operate to produce a better world without individual greed, or is this just a fanciful dream?

Ray doesn't provide an answer, but acutely poses a question that is central to the construction of, as we said earlier, a convincing political narrative for the left.

Thanks once again to all contributors to this issue. Any suggestions or articles/letters for the next issue are always welcome. The winter edition of *Perspectives* will appear at the end of January.

In the meantime best wishes for the new year in 2006.

Sean Feeny
Editor



EURIG SCANDRETT'S



The Gleneagles G8 is over and largely forgotten. What – as the Edinburgh Active Citizens' group put it – was all the fuss about? Did it make any difference to the poorest of the world? Bob Geldof certainly thinks it made a difference and he keeps telling us through the media, but outside government he seems to be the only one. It would probably be churlish to say that no difference was made but, since it was so little compared with what the potential was, it seems as good as nothing. The demands of the Make Poverty History coalition – fair trade; more and better aid; drop the debt – were scarcely achieved.

Yes there was a commitment to some more aid – \$25 billion by 2010, compared with the \$50 billion required immediately to tackle extreme poverty (and compared with \$200 billion spent by the USA alone on the occupation of Iraq). Some debt cancellation had been already negotiated by Gordon Brown, and will displace some of the aid. Both aid and debt cancellation apply only to selected African countries and are linked to economic liberalisation, privatisation and public sector cuts. Trade discussions have simply been moved on to the next, Hong Kong, round of negotiations of the World Trade Organisation. The WTO exists to promote free, rather than fair, trade and is currently in the process of rebuilding its credibility following the monumental collapse of negotiations in Cancun in 2003.

On climate change, that other big issue which Tony Blair put on the agenda at the G8, the outcome was worse than nothing. The USA grudgingly acknowledged that climate change might be occurring and there was a general agreement to talk about it some more. At the same time the G8 states agreed to incentives to companies to boost oil supply in order to reduce the cost of a barrel. Since the G8, the US announced a partnership with others, including India and China, to tackle climate change, essentially through trade in efficiency technologies – no targets, no reductions expected. Tony Blair has also started making noises that he is wavering from his formerly leading role in championing carbon dioxide reduction targets.

The task of realignment is difficult, and involves working with people you don't agree with ...

The next phase of the talks on the post-Kyoto United Nations climate change process will take place in Montreal on 3rd December, which is also the 21st anniversary of the Bhopal pesticide factory gas leak which killed 20,000 and is possibly global capitalism's biggest single criminal act (for which no one responsible has yet been prosecuted). To coincide with the Montreal talks there will be marches and campaigns against climate chaos throughout the world, including in Edinburgh and London – check the website on www.campaigncc.org.

The main achievement of the G8 in Scotland was the mobilisation in civil society and the signs, albeit fragile, of new opportunities for political realignment. The protest marches, counter-cultural events and alternative summits were impressive, both in numbers and diversity, but also in terms of the degree of alliance building which went on. Yes it's easy to point out the tensions and the fallings out, but it was magnificent compared with what could have occurred. There was negligible violence, despite the best intentions of a tiny number of protesters, large numbers of police and sections of the media. The behaviour of the riot police was atrocious, in Edinburgh and Gleneagles, and they should be taken to account for their whole provocative and exacerbating tactics. But there were also examples of policing compatible with a non-violent, humanistic and democratic socialism. Yes the Socialists and Greens have both need to grow up and move on from their post-G8 infantile squabble over the former's parliamentary protest. I have argued elsewhere* that there are opportunities for political realignment emerging from civil society's response to the G8, although we need to take seriously the demands of what that means. The task of realignment is difficult, and involves working with people you don't agree with, but who are on the side of humanity, democracy and non-violence.

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

*www.scottishleftreview.org/php/public/pastissues.php?action=article&docid=253

AFTER BLAIR, AFTER NEW LABOUR

With third term blues setting in as the New Labour project degenerates, **Gerry Hassan** looks at the prospects for centre-left politics in the post-Blair – and post-New Labour – future.

The political weather is slowly, but perceptibly changing. A historic Labour third term should have been a moment for political joy and celebration, but instead it is one of doubt and anxiety. A government with a seemingly impressive majority of 66 was elected on a mere 35.2 per cent of the vote – the lowest percentage share of any majority government in British history.

Since the election things have got worse, as Blair has accelerated his search for a “legacy” by running against his party and challenging its sensibilities on issue after issue. This time it does not seem to be paying political dividends for him, but instead accelerating the end game of the Blair era and degeneration of the New Labour project to such an extent as to ruin the inheritance for Brown and pass the torch on to the new heir apparent, the future Tory leader David Cameron.

This essay attempts to look beyond the short-term crises inherent in the unravelling of New Labour, and examine longer-term issues about the state of the progressive tradition and possibilities for centre-left politics in Labour and elsewhere beyond the Blair premiership.

New Labour ... has celebrated markets and competition, championed privatisation, deregulation and corporate orthodoxies, while acquiescing on inequality and social division.

THE PARADOXES OF NEW LABOUR

What have we gained with the decade of Labour dominance we have experienced? First, we have electorally gained with three unprecedented Labour election victories: an impressive feat for a party which previously had only won two working majorities in its history. Second, politically the progressive tradition is weaker than it ever has been and the much vaunted and talked about progressive consensus so beloved of Blair and Brown is further away than it ever has been. These two facts are directly connected, in what can only be described as the paradox of New Labour's success: in that it has made a virtue and strength out of its manoeuvrability and tactical agility, but at ultimately a high price.

We need to understand the strange beast that is New Labour. It is of course not a singular entity, but one with many faces and voices, which has gone through many transformations. For example, the Blairite version has come to have very little relationship with progressive ideas with Blair himself seldom talking about what most Labour supporters would see as the most significant positive achievements of the government

such as the national minimum wage, commitment to abolish child poverty, and constitutional reform. Elsewhere within the project other strands have existed, some unattractive such as Peter Mandelson's celebration of celebrity, success, wealth and power seen in his courting of the Murdoch press (and family), and David Blunkett's punitive approach to civil liberties and welfare, as if taking a perverse pride in alienating liberal opinion. Other strands have been more attuned to progressive opinion such as Gordon Brown's commitment to redistribution and a contemporary notion of egalitarianism.

New Labour in all these shades, but most explicitly in its Blairite version, has made an explicit compromise and embrace with neo-liberalism. It has celebrated markets and competition, championed privatisation, deregulation and corporate orthodoxies, while acquiescing in inequality and social division. There is much debate in progressive circles about the scale of the embrace, with some such as *New Left Review* arguing that New Labour is an unequivocal part of the neo-liberal orthodoxy, while others such as Andrew Gamble believe that a social democratic

impulse exists alongside the Thatcherite orthodoxy. Alan Finlayson in his persuasive book, *Making Sense of New Labour*, accurately describes New Labour as more a managerial project in its assumptions and constant mantras about change and globalisation, than a political one, while Neal Lawson, of *Renewal* journal and *Compass*, has talked of “neo-Labour”.

There is still much confusion, even at this late hour, about New Labour. Polly Toynbee has talked of this being “the best Labour Government in the last 50 years”, viewing Blair as “a political genius – three times victor – creator of a left-of-centre economically solid and socially progressive” (*Guardian*, June 3rd 2005). She then goes on to admit that many of the “good stories [are] not part of [the] narrative” such as Sure Start, childcare, and has consistently over the last eight years bemoaned this fact, seemingly unable to come to terms with the painful reality that these progressive triumphs are just not part of the dominant narrative in the project: the Blairite version of New Labour.

Others who should know better can get just as confused such as Mike Rustin, academic and editor of *Soundings*, who in a confused post-election piece meandered back and forward between optimism and pessimism. Rustin commented that watching Blair’s progress across the country during the election, reminded him of “his achievements and virtues than of his failures and virtues”. While this could be excused as empathising with someone once all powerful, now wounded, struggling and not realising the extent of the tragedy they had brought upon themselves, Rustin goes further, arguing that “New Labour’s successes [have] created some space for a more progressive politics”. I wonder where that might be? At the small margin New Labour has left to its right on the “war on terror” and “war on civil liberties”?

At the second *Compass* conference in London in June 2005,

The last eight years have been difficult for many (probably most) Labour supporters, but if Blair had fully had his way they could have been a lot worse.

Douglas Alexander in a debate with Polly Toynbee and Helen Jackson, former MP, was allowed to go completely unchallenged when he stated that social democracy was strong in this country and “in a good state of health” – comments which belie any kind of grasp of where we are.

Why after eleven years of New Labour are people still confused? One reason as I have mentioned is that New Labour is a hybrid – complicit in advancing neo-liberalism, marketisation and the erosion of the public realm – while still retaining a social democratic impulse. New Labour, the Blairite version, has become a voice for the winners rather than the losers, for those in the power elites, rather than the powerless, an advance guard for the apologists and advocates of post-democracy and the new class of corporate, political and media establishments, who are associated with it. But that hasn’t been all there has been to the last eight years. Blair’s ultimate fantasy of New Labour would be his friend Berlusconi’s *Forza Italia*, but other forces and constraints have fortunately been at work.

The last eight years have been difficult for many (probably most) Labour supporters, but if Blair had fully had his way they could have been a lot worse. The ultimate Blairite world would have been the complete re-engineering of the Labour Party, the marketisation of large swathes of our public realm, and a liberal imperialist crusade across the world. It is a frightening, unenlightening spectre, which makes previous Labour leaders such as Attlee and Wilson seem positively benign.

THE LEFT’S LACK OF A STORY

The left once had a defining project and story, namely, the idea of socialism. It had a notion of political economy based on Keynesian demand management and planning, the need to redistribute income, wealth and power, and the importance of the state as an instrument of change and redistribution. It also had a sense of

agency rooted in the organised working class and trade union movement. It does not matter that life often turned out to be a bit more complicated than this; the over-arching story gave a sense of values and mission, and timescales and why small-scale incremental change might be worth supporting if it was leading in the direction of transformational change. All of this made the inevitable compromises worthwhile and bearable.

If we look at the sad state of American politics we can see an even more unedifying environment. In the words of *Dissent* editor Michael Walzer, the US right-wing have a defining story and sense of over-arching purpose about the market or God or both. The left on the other hand in the States has no story or higher sense of purpose, and instead engages on an issue by issue moral examination and forensic debate, so people are for military intervention in one situation, against it in another, pro-choice, pro-gay, pro-gun control. This leads to an exhausting, incoherent, tactical politics where one side – ours – argues elaborate, complicated, evidence based politics, while the other side have an overall ideological project. This is not to argue the conservative side are conducting the better politics, given the apparent contradictions in the US conservative movement, and its problems with the Bush administration (something centre-leftists would be familiar with). Instead, it is to point out that the cost of this approach for progressives is to cede so much ground and the initiative to the conservatives.

What comes after New Labour? The assumption in many centre-left circles is that things return to some kind of undefined normalcy pre-New Labour. What kind of golden age? The high point of Labour’s Forward March: 1951, pre-Forward March before going into freefall: pre-1978, or pre-1994, when Labour had just lost four elections and people wondered if Labour could ever win again? Many discussions about

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New Labour seem to be predicated on the hope that once we get rid of Blair, we can return to the progressive tradition and priorities which sit within Labour. This seems to miss the obvious point that for progressivism to flourish it needs to be tended to, nurtured and like a flower, watered and cared for. The exact opposite has happened in the last decade of New Labour with progressive ideas left uncared for and unchampioned in the dominant versions of the project, and British politics inexorably pushed by the logic of Blair further and further rightward.

There also seems to be a naïve assumption, not exclusive to the centre-left, but found across the political spectrum, that New Labour is as bad as it gets. This tends to see the excesses of New Labour as specific to the Blair project or the man himself, rather than see them in wider context. New Labour's hyper centralism and misuse of the state, its obsessional, masculinised, presidential, personality driven, anti-parliamentary politics and its ideological commitment to Atlanticism, have been evident characteristics of British politics for the last two decades.

Putting New Labour into wider context, its failings can be seen as part of the legacy of Thatcherism's break with the old ways of doing things. Jim Callaghan was, in a sense, the last Prime Minister, by which we traditionally understand the constitutional meaning of the term and all its trapping such as cabinet government. Thatcher was a new break with old political arrangements who shook up the ancient British regime to drive through her revolution. John Major briefly and unsuccessfully tried to return to the pre-1979 order of cabinet discussion and negotiation, but could not do so, and eventually came Blair, promising decisive, purposeful leadership and action. The cumulative effect of this has been that the old checks and balances of British government have been eroded to near extinction. The Blair government makes the Thatcher administration

... it is still true that for all its faults social democracy, like the Labour Party, are the best vehicles, imperfect, flawed, compromised, that we currently have on offer.

seem positively liberal in many aspects, but it is its proud and legitimate offspring, daring to go where even she could not on 90 day internment, ID cards, a national police force in England and Wales, and so on.

THE SEARCH FOR A NEW STORY: AFTER SOCIALISM, AFTER BLAIR

If we are in such a predicament today, how do we get out of it. We are without a clear story, and need to search for and identify a new kind of story for progressives. We need to ask what would a progressive story look like? What values would it embody? We need to start asking hard, searching questions about the nature of the Labour Party as an advocate and champion of progressive values. And we have to ask whether a modernised social democracy is the best set of ideas for carrying forward our cause, or whether a new progressive sentiment can arise in the foothills of the 21st century?

We need to have a pragmatic attitude to the effectiveness of Labour as the historic advocates of progressivism. Across its history, Labour has consistently failed to carry the banner of progressive ideas convincingly, or put itself at the head of such a movement. The exception to this is 1945, a case which proves the wider point.

It seems to me that the values of any progressive politics lie in the three themes of supporting the egalitarian impulse, the democratic ideal and public realm found in the Labour Party and trade union movements in the 20th century. Where revisionism is urgently required is in the notion of economic growth as the main measure of progress and means to funding the good life, dealing with hard choices, and funding redistribution. Social democracy as much as neo-liberalism bought into an economic interpretation of human relations. Yet, it is still true that for all its faults social democracy, like the Labour Party, are the best vehicles, imperfect, flawed, compromised, that we currently have on offer.

A new progressive politics has to have a number of ingredients which involve thinking beyond the death knells of the Blair Government. Firstly, it requires as I argued earlier a new sense of story. What are the over-arching narratives of the centre-left today? Secondly, it necessitates a sense of song in that it needs a musical soundtrack to accompany the mood of the times. It is revealing of the political moment we live in, that despite the worldwide protests against the Iraq war, for "Making Poverty History", against the G8 elite, and for environmental justice, that the musical reference points of political change are still locked in the 1960s and Dylan, Lennon, et al. A radical social movement needs to inspire songs, music, concerts and inspire and share collective moments of celebration, rather than see pop stars become part of the post-democracy establishment as Bono and Bob Geldof have become.

Thirdly, the left needs to find new heroes and even a few villains. Who are the heroes of the left now? Bono and Geldof are too individualistic, self-promoting and not connected to a wider constituency; Nelson Mandela is perhaps the last obvious and universal hero the left has. And we clearly need some villains, as political movements are defined by who is in them and who is outside them, who its friends are and its enemies. New Labour, in its early phase tried to pretend it had no enemies, but in reality in its Blairite version, its main enemy was the labour movement. Surely given the state of Britain and the world some of our enemies should be obvious: the advocates of post-democracy in the press, the corporate giants who press for flexibility and deregulation, but will not do anything on pensions, and the fundamentalist marketeers who inhabit large parts of our public life.

Finally, if progressives are to do anything to stem the tide of decline we have seen not just with New Labour, but in the last twenty-five years, we need to have

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a new notion of agency. The unproblematic idea of the Labour movement has been fundamentally weakened, as has the uncritical idea of the state as a force for good. Instead, we are faced with the challenge of a more pluralist, unpredictable post-labourist politics, in part brought about by Blair's humiliation and marginalisation of the labour and trade union movements, as well as the more diverse, fragmented society we now live in.

Mainstream observers and commentators have long argued that Blair's legacy has been to make Labour safe and remove the threat of socialism. However, it is also equally true that Blair's inheritance may be the potential of this more diverse progressive landscape. The forthcoming Brown leadership is more likely to be transitional, rather than transformational, in part because Brown sits as part of the older, conservative, labourist tradition, ill at ease with pluralism and a new politics. Blair's ultimate bequest may well be a post-labourist politics where the forces of Labour tribalism and chauvinism are no longer the central forces of progressive politics. And in the long view of history this has to be seen, with all the disappointments and defeats inflicted on progressives by the Blair Government, as a significant opening, even as a bit of a liberation.

It may not feel like that at the moment, but in a decade or so, after the Brown interregnum, and when David Cameron is cosily ensconced in No 10 Downing Street, we will have the opportunity to judge what the long term effects of the New Labour decade have been.

■ *Gerry Hassan is a writer and researcher, a Demos Associate, Head of the Demos Scotland 2020 programme, and editor of the recent Scotland 2020: Hopeful Stories for a Northern Nation. His forthcoming book, After Blair: Politics After the New Labour Decade, is published next spring in association with Compass.*

Growing disillusionment amongst the Labour and non-Labour left with the New Labour project led to the formation of Compass two years ago. **David Purdy** looks at the group's search for a new direction.



Compass was launched in the autumn of 2003 with the publication of a 6,000-word manifesto setting out a "vision for the democratic left". The manifesto was signed by some twenty prominent left-of-centre commentators, academics and directors of think-tanks and pressure groups, including Colin Crouch, Andrew Gamble, Michael Jacobs, Ruth Lister and David Marquand. In varying degrees, the signatories had all been enthusiasts for the New Labour project in the mid-1990s, but even before the Iraq war had become progressively disillusioned and were now seeking a new purpose and direction for the democratic left. Anyone, including non-Labour Party members, who broadly agreed with the manifesto, was invited to subscribe.

The moving spirit behind the new organisation is Neal Lawson, Managing Editor of *Renewal*, a journal launched in 1993 by a group of intellectuals and activists who, during Labour's wilderness years in the 1980s, had occupied a position somewhere between *Marxism Today* and *Tribune* and were firmly opposed to the various "hard left" sects lodged permanently or temporarily within the Labour Party, from the Bennite Campaign group to the Trotskyite Militant tendency. As its name suggests, the original mission of

Renewal was to support efforts to "modernise" the party and jettison ideological baggage in the aftermath of Labour's fourth successive election defeat in 1992 when, at a time of deep recession and high unemployment, voters opted for a sub-Thatcherite Tory government led by John Major rather than the mildly redistributive and re-regulative version of social democracy offered by Neil Kinnock. Thus, like others on the democratic left at the time, the *Renewal* group were prepared to throw in their lot, more or less critically, with Tony Blair and New Labour. (Indeed, it is interesting to note that the journal's Editorial Advisory Board still includes the names of Tony Blair, Anthony Giddens, Patricia Hewitt, Ruth Kelly, Alan Milburn and David Miliband alongside those of Robin Cook and Clare Short).

LOST ITS WAY

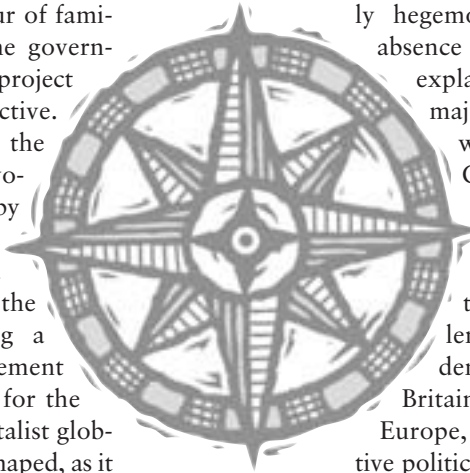
The central message of Compass is that New Labour has lost its way. Despite presiding over a long period of rising employment, falling unemployment and general prosperity, and despite some real policy achievements – whether regularly trumpeted like the National Minimum Wage and increased expenditure on public services or carried out by stealth like the use of tax credits to redis-

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tribute income in favour of families with children – the government's overall political project has been essentially reactive. Chastened by the Thatcherite counter-revolution and traumatised by the defeat of 1992, New Labour has moved from pessimism about the prospects of achieving a progressive social settlement to positive enthusiasm for the prevailing form of capitalist globalisation, inspired and shaped, as it has been, by American power and free market theology. In this sense, it is no longer a social democratic party, for it has abandoned any idea of setting limits to the operation of market forces in a bid, however cautious and gradual, to create a fairer, greener, more cohesive and more democratic society. Indeed, its ruling purpose is to *extend* the proportion of social activity subject to the disciplines and norms of the market and to persuade, induce or, if necessary, force us all to adapt to a world of unfettered global competition.

CHALLENGE FACING LEFT

New Labour's neo-liberalism has cost the party dear both in members and in votes. Its unprecedented success in winning a working majority for a third term is largely due to the bias built into Britain's electoral system and the feebleness of the opposition it faces, not only from the right, but also from the left. Of course, in Britain parties to the left of Labour have never made much headway. But nowhere in Europe has the left managed to produce a credible, yet inspiring programme for government which engages seriously with the central problem of our time: how to protect social and environmental standards in a globalised capitalist economy. It is one thing for voters to reject neo-liberalism, as happened in the French and Dutch referenda on the EU constitutional treaty last Spring and as was also evident in the success of the newly formed German Left Party; it is quite another to create a potential-



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ly hegemonic alternative. (The absence of such an alternative explains why the numerical majority of votes and seats won by the SPD, the Greens and the Left Party combined cannot be converted into a governing coalition.) Thus, the challenge facing the democratic left, both in Britain and elsewhere in Europe, is to devise a constructive political programme which is, at once, radical, feasible and popular.

UMBRELLA ORGANISATION

Compass is not another think-tank, preferring to describe itself as a "democratic left pressure group". Certainly, despite slender resources and an adverse political climate, it has some impressive achievements to its credit. In less than two years, it has secured seed-corn funding from the Joseph Rowntree Trust, established an organisational structure, recruited over 1000 paid-up members, organised packed fringe-meetings at successive Labour Party conferences, produced a pamphlet entitled *Dare More Democracy* and, through the indefatigable efforts of Neal Lawson, got its ideas broadcast or published in the mainstream media. It has also held two major national conferences at the TUC in London, one in October 2004 and one in June 2005, each attended by 600 people, with keynote addresses given by Gordon Brown and Robin Cook, respectively. Both events featured a plethora of seminars organised by various think-tanks, pressure groups and publications. Some of these were hardy Labour perennials, like the Fabian Society and *Tribune*; but several were non-party organs and organisations such as *Soundings*, Demos, the New Economic Foundation, Make Votes Count and the Fawcett Society, lending substance to the hope that Compass will serve as an umbrella for the democratic left, both inside and outside the Labour Party.

There is a certain (openly acknowledged) tension between acting as an internal Labour Party pressure group and appealing to a broader constituency extending well beyond the party, and it remains to be seen whether these two roles can be reconciled. But the effort is worth making. For one thing, the party has lost so many members and its internal life is so moribund that critics of New Labour have little alternative but to connect with forces outside the party if they are to have any chance of influencing its leadership and policies. More generally, there is simply no future for old-fashioned, party conceit; this is the age of pluralism, dialogue and alliance. Of course, there is a distinction between a change of leadership and a change of project, just as there is a distinction between a change of government and change of regime. But the leading lights in Compass are well aware of this and, over the next twelve to eighteen months, are organising a series of nationwide working groups and regional conferences, co-ordinated by Hetan Shah, formerly Programme Director at the New Economics Foundation, to develop a medium-term strategy and programme aimed at challenging New Labour's neo-liberalism, changing the terms of national political debate and putting the democratic left firmly on the political map.

At present, we are living through a dark and morbid period when, as Gramsci put it, the old is dead, but the new is struggling to be born. Such periods do not last long and if the British left is to play any part in the coming process of political realignment, it must learn from its past failures, rethink its policies and reconnect with the public. In navigating uncharted waters, a compass certainly helps.

■ *David Purdy is a member of Democratic Left Scotland's national council and author of Eurovision or American Dream? Britain, the Euro and the Future of Europe (Luath Press in association with Democratic Left Scotland, £3.99).*

GREEN GOLD?

Glasgow-based artist **Jan Nimmo** has employed her visual skills as a central part in campaigning for justice for Central American banana workers. Here she outlines and illustrates her work with communities there and in Scotland.

As an artist and designer, over the past 20 years I have worked on a wide range of creative projects from painting and textiles to film-making and facilitating for community groups. Since the early 1990s I have been a regular visitor to Latin America, carrying out research into popular arts and establishing links with community organisations.

My work is essentially people-centred, and about the lives that people lead: from portraits of Cuban musicians and Mexican artisans, transcribing banana workers' testimonies in Costa Rica and documenting picket lines in Ecuador, to running workshops for Glasgow schoolchildren. In all of this I see my role as part of a bigger project – that of building bridges between people and across cultures.

WHY LATIN AMERICA?

In the late 1980s I had started learning Spanish as a purely recreational activity – I had been to Spain for the first time and realised there was so much that I was missing without speaking the language. Little did I know where this would lead me!

In the 1990s I became a regular visitor to Mexico and also spent four months working in Cuba. The focus of these visits was to find out more about the popular arts and culture of these countries and to meet the people involved in keeping these traditions alive. At the same time, back in Glasgow, I found myself increasingly involved

The focus of these visits was to find out more about the popular arts and culture of these countries.



Banana workers' children

in translating and interpreting for visiting speakers and activists, through a more or less informal network of voluntary organisations.

WHY BANANA WORKERS?

My first involvement with the banana trade was when I was asked to interpret for Costa Rican trade unionists, Carlos Arguedas and Doris Calvo, at a series of meetings in Glasgow in 1998. Carlos stayed with us at our house and although this visit was brief, we have kept in touch ever since. I am currently working with Carlos on a film project which will highlight the environmental and social impacts of the agrochemicals used to control cash

crops such as bananas and pineapples.

In 1999 I took up the part-time post of Scottish representative for the campaign group Banana Link – in effect what I had been doing on a voluntary basis since my first encounter with Carlos and Doris. These days I continue to work with Banana Link on a freelance basis on one-off projects; this allows my time to be better allocated and also gives me greater freedom to pursue my own work.

FILM

A few years ago I started to work with film and video – initially to document my own work – but I soon found myself recording events on my travels, such as pop-

GREEN GOLD?

ular festivals in Mexico. It was a small step from this to taking my small video camera with me to Costa Rica and to Ecuador to document the day-to-day lives of the people I met there.

BONITA: UGLY BANANAS

Ecuador is leading the “Race to the Bottom”, where supermarkets are sourcing cheap bananas from national and multinational companies. Ecuador is the largest exporter of bananas in Latin America, employing 300,000 workers in this sector – of whom less than 1% are unionised. Conditions are appalling, wages are low and the combination of weak laws and powerful companies ensures that trade unions are almost impossible to organise. In spite of this, a group called FENACLE is leading an organising drive across the banana sector.

In 2002, on my first trip to Ecuador, I worked with FENACLE to document the strike that was declared on the Los Alamos plantation. Los Alamos is owned by Alvaro Noboa, Ecuador’s richest man and serial presidential candidate. His company, Bonita Brands, is the fifth largest banana company in the world. Thanks to the workers and their occupation of the plantation, I was able to gain access and film the appalling living conditions.

Ten days into the strike we received news that the striking workers had been evicted, and when we arrived at the plantation, I came across the aftermath of a shooting. 200 armed men were now occupying the plantation and the workers had been kicked out – some sustaining serious injuries. I stayed with the workers that day and filmed their testimonies about the events which had happened. Later that same day the company guards opened fire on us and several more workers were injured.

Since that visit to Ecuador, I have made a 25 minute film, *Bonita: Ugly Bananas*, documenting these events. The film was premiered at Document 2 Human Rights Film Festival, in Glasgow



last year. I have since made a Spanish language version of the film, which has now been screened in Ecuador. I want this film to be used as a resource, and to be seen by as many people as possible – so please contact me for copies!

COSTA RICA: PARADISE LOST?

Costa Rica is widely seen as being a tropical paradise in comparison to other Central American countries. However, banana workers are marginalised, exposed to chronic health risks and subjected to systematic trade union repression. Trade unionists, like Carlos Arguedas, are fighting a battle to combat the socio-environmental impact of the use of chemicals. Many workers, like Carlos, were made sterile by exposure to the chemical Nemagon (DBCP). Almost half of the material costs on the average plantation is spent on a whole variety of agrochemicals used throughout the growing process.

Since the market for bananas became saturated with cheap fruit from Ecuador, Costa Rican producers have taken the hint to diversify. Unfortunately this is not as positive as it sounds, as one monoculture is being substituted for another – pineapples.

I have visited pineapple plantations and passed by many more on the road. If this is to be the future then that future is going to be bleak. I have spoken to smallholders forced off the land, their livestock poisoned, their livelihoods gone and left with no option but to sell to the fruit companies.

Pineapples are grown in intensive conditions with the aid of a cocktail of chemicals, as is the case with banana production. The difference is that pineapples lack the ground cover and humus-producing leaves of the banana. The result has been a massive increase in erosion and run-off of pesticides into the once pristine lowland river systems. I visited communities which depend on the river as a lifeline, which are now seriously affected by the poisoning of fish and the silting up of waterways.

I have now embarked on a film project to document this, with the help of Carlos Arguedas and other trade unionists and environmental scientists working in the Caribbean zone of Costa Rica. Last year I was able to take testimonies from banana workers in the areas affected and this autumn I will be returning to Costa Rica to gather the material I need to finish the





film. I intend to have the completed film ready to show at next year's Document 4 Human Rights Film Festival.

TESTIMONIES

Since 2000 I have been working on a project called Green Gold – Oro Verde. This is a personal attempt to create links between banana workers and their families in Central and South America and consumers and workers in Scotland, and to raise awareness of the human cost of the banana trade. So far, I have made field trips to Ecuador, Costa Rica and Panama, and have met workers, families, trade unionists and scientists from all of the Latin American producer countries. I work through trade unions to gain access to the people involved and to gather images and testimonies.

Women workers are particularly vulnerable and are exposed to sexual harassment and single mothers have an especially hard time as there is no child-care provision. However, many of the women I have met have been inspirational and I am glad to say that the newest union, in Honduras, is led by two women.

This body of work will become part of a multi-media travelling exhibition, including a series of video resources and a website archive of workers' testimonies recording the day-to-day reality of life on a banana plantation. The project draws on a variety of visual media: drawing, photography,

Part of the satisfaction is also knowing that a banner from Falkirk could be paraded on the May Day celebrations in Guayaquil.

GET INVOLVED!

I am happy to arrange screenings of my films and talks about the Green Gold Project – for trade unions, community groups, schools and anyone else who is interested.

- Contact me – jan@greengold.org.uk
- Visit the Green Gold website www.greengold.org.uk
- For information about community arts projects visit www.jannimmo.com
- To get involved in campaigning www.bananalink.org.uk

printmaking, installation and film. At present I am seeking funding to develop the project further and to reach a wider audience.

WORKERS' WOODCUTS

I have used woodcut prints to make a series of portraits of banana workers – people I have met in their living and working environment. I like using this medium because each work can be reproduced as many times as I like. This gives me the opportunity to give the work back – to the person in the picture, to their family or to their union.

I also like woodcuts because they involve a physical effort on my part – the process somehow seems fit for a portrait of someone who lives by the toil of their own hands. The medium is flexible – the same block can be used with different inks and with different types of paper or with painted or collaged backgrounds and text. This can turn a portrait into a campaign poster!

WORKING WITH COMMUNITIES

Here in Scotland I have found myself increasingly involved with community groups, in part





through my translating and interpreting work. Banner making has become a popular recurrent theme for these issues-based workshops. It is especially rewarding when I am able to introduce visitors to whatever group has organised a workshop, to use the discussion group to explore the similarities between the problems facing communities across the world and then to see the visual representation of these ideas emerging on a banner. Part of the satisfaction is also knowing that a banner from Falkirk could be paraded on the May Day celebrations in Guayaquil.

WHERE TO NOW?

I was brought up in a mining family, and from an early age was aware of the role played by the union and its achievements for the wider community. The same applies to banana plantations where unions have been able to organise and I believe that this freedom of association is fundamental and the only way forward for Latin American banana workers to get any kind of justice. And rebuilding a strong trade union movement will be essential for combating the neo-liberal agenda. In the meantime there is plenty we can do at our end to show our solidarity as consumers and fellow workers.

■ All woodcuts and photos used to illustrate this article are the work of Jan Nimmo.

DEMONSTRATING THE DIVERSE ISSUES OF REAL LIFE

Democratic Left Scotland convener **Stuart Fairweather** has put down his political strategy documents long enough to read a novel ... but then again, it is called *Demo!*

How much growing up, how much living, can anyone do in two short years? Simultaneously, how can you illustrate the development of intertwined, yet distinct political cultures? All this and ensure an entertaining and enthralling read?

For those on the Left that have spent much of our lives at demonstrations this book is worth reading. Not because it is nostalgic. It is not; it reminds you of the complex lives that surround events. The anti-capitalist movement has often been caricatured as simply being a collection on diverse issues. Here, Alison Miller's debut novel *Demo* has brought together the diverse issues of real life and put them to play with the demonstration as staging.

Demo does this as it moves from Glasgow in November 2002, via Florence and London, and back to Scotland concluding in January 2005. This highly contemporary book covers a lot of ground.

CONNECTED EXPERIENCES

The two main characters, Clare and Laetitia, are very much separate entities held apart by geogra-

phy, class, culture and, to some degree, age. *Demo*, however, sees them pulled together through their connected experiences of sexual, political, and emotional relationships. Miller's writing, given the subject matter is neither overly romanticised or reductionist. It is very real.

The book opens on Clare's life in Glasgow and her request to go on the big demo. Her small "c" catholic, small "c" communist upbringing is appropriately described in terms that render it prosaic. Her relationship with her father is dealt with particularly sympathetically. Peter challenges stereotyping. Burns-quoting, non-tabloid-reading, Blair-denouncing, he encourages his daughter's enthusiasm for education, but there are limits. This warmth does not entirely extend to his protest-organising non-working son Danny. Clare's mother equally encourages and supports her daughter whilst doting on her son. All this is in contrast to Laetitia, but we have yet to meet her.

Perhaps unsurprisingly Clare's parents relent and allow her to travel with Danny. He is organis-

ing the bus to the anti-war demonstration at the Social Forum in Florence. The dynamic of Miller's narrative is unleashed. This is however no travelogue for revolutionaries. The politics of this book are as much about personal journeys as they are about the issues and subjects that it skilfully addresses.

Before we leave George Square sixteen year old Clare spots and is spotted by Julian, a dreadlocked Cambridge graduate who is flattering Glasgow with his faltering engagement with his PhD. On first sight Clare is unclear whether this is attraction or revulsion. Julian's difference and indeed arrogance has her trapped. By the time we reach Florence he has a plan.

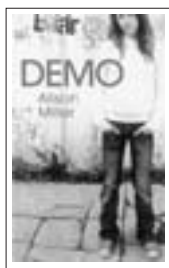
IDEALISM

Italy is different, but as her dad told her at this time of year it is not warm. Quickly we are dropped into the world of pre-demonstration idealism: food, wine, debate and political song. Here we meet Laetitia. To Clare she is older, sophisticated, beautiful and open. To Danny she is just beautiful. It is apparent that Julian and Laetitia's connection from their time at Cambridge involved more than study. Julian's bitterness at a world full of fools is amplified by Laetitia's presence. This of course does not deflect his attraction from Clare.

Circumstances and wine lead Danny and Laetitia together. Julian is there for Clare's sexual awakening. Miller deals with sex in a detached fashion, distracted by issues of power and the potential for exploitation – or perhaps this is the point.

ABSORB THE DIFFERENCE

In a detour Clare's visit to the Ponte Vecchio is marked by her exposure to Da Vinci's *David*. Arguably something more important is happening to her but Julian is on hand to drag her to his bed and then to the demo. Pulled by the hand Clare is led through thousands of marchers. She wants to absorb the difference of colour,



■ **Demo**
by Alison Miller
(Hamish Hamilton,
2005, £12.99)

Alison Miller's debut novel Demo has brought together the diverse issues of real life and put them to play with the demonstration as staging.

language and experience. He wants to get to the vanguard.

Later recriminations take us to Julian and Laetitia being reconciled. The spurned Danny turns to organisational matters, whilst Clare gets back on the bus with her thoughts. We will return to Glasgow but first dropping Laetitia in London provides us with some insight into her life.

For the self confessed lipstick revolutionary all is not a garden of roses. Mummy is a bitter, hurtful drunk. Daddy is off abroad in sunnier climes. Here the book could have fallen into a cliché that it had created for itself. However we are reminded here, as elsewhere in the book, of the limitations of crudely essentialising the identity and indeed history of others.

A sub-plot emerges that explores a family connection of Laetitia's. A great aunt visited Italy, exploring art but also escaping her family's and society's disdain for a relationship with another woman.

RETURN TO SCHOOL

Back in Glasgow things are not the same as they were. For Clare returning to school is difficult, her friend Farkhanda hears about the demonstration and about Julian but not about everything.

For Danny, coming home means another confrontation with his father, this one leading to him leaving and moving in with Julian and Jed. Clare's hurt relating to Julian is paralleled by Danny's over Laetitia but he has a campaign to organise, a war to stop and a student flat to clean. Whilst Clare and Laetitia reflect, Danny and Julian reach a workable hatred for each other. Jed, real name Arjun Singh if anybody was to ask, maintains some sort of order until, of course, Laetitia decides to come to Glasgow to be with Julian rather than return to Cambridge.

The reader is next given a view of the events in Florence from the standpoint of both Clare and Laetitia. Clare feels the need to grow dreadlocks and drop out of her exams. Recalling one's own coping mechanisms at the age of

sixteen is helpful at this point. Laetitia dismisses Danny's angst, comfortable that he appears to be dealing with things. Julian, having been literally scalped in Florence, appears vindicated at this point.

It is a feature of our times that there is always something new to demonstrate about. Blair's visit to Glasgow on the eve of the planned invasion of Iraq provides this opportunity.

UNJUST WAR

Jed, Julian and Danny are going. Clare, Farkhanda and her sister Shenaz are going. Clare's mum Maeve and dad Peter are going. On the morning of the march, as they travel to Glasgow Green, it appears as if all of Scotland is going. Surely with this many marching Blair will not follow Bush into an unjust war.

Clare's experience of this demonstration is different. Like the author she is a participant observer, she is not a visitor. This is not about the spectacle. Reading the description reminds you of the level of expectation but also about the recognition of how far things have gone.

The Glasgow demonstration was not the only one that day and Julian remarks that Laetitia is at an even bigger event in London. After another post-demonstration sexual encounter with Julian, Clare hears that Laetitia is pregnant.

Some books might end here but after the demonstration there is the preparation for the next struggle. Laetitia returns to Glasgow for the birth of Mathew, a wee star that, remarkably, some might say resembles Clare's brother. Maeve being Maeve of course offers to help with Mathew. Even Danny lends a hand. Julian and Laetitia find support in establishing their new family.

Clare eventually cuts the dreads – the ties to Julian! She takes the bus to her auntie's in Helensburgh and life goes on.

■ *Stuart Fairweather is convener of Democratic Left Scotland.*

PLANNING REQUIRES MORE THAN A NOD TO GREEN PERSPECTIVES

Patrick Harvie MSP considers the forthcoming planning bill.

Most people would rather discuss almost anything than planning ... until their local park comes under threat, or construction begins on a new road or incinerator in their community. Then they sit up and take notice. Involving people earlier to help create a positive vision of how they want their community to develop is not an easy task.

But the forthcoming planning bill is not just any old bill. It's crucial. It will set the context for virtually all development in Scotland, perhaps for decades. It's an opportunity to put in place a planning system which not only works better, but is geared toward the most important objective for 21st century politics, sustainable development.

Much is written about sustainable development, and though politicians of all colours are keen to use the term it's often little more than window dressing. A little "green thread" to decorate the familiar façade of government. It's business as usual, folks, but this time with a bit more recycling.

Few accept that to transform our society to one which meets today's needs, as the phrase goes, without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs, will demand a significant change in the way we live.

The planning system could be one of the most important tools we have for facilitating this transformation. It could also go a long way to redress the

... a system that's more efficient at doing exactly what it's doing now is not what we should be looking for.

existing power imbalance, giving real rights to communities who currently have no control over the commercial interests which drive development. So if the Scottish Executive passes up this opportunity it will be little short of tragic.

The recently published proposals from the Labour/LibDem coalition made disappointing reading. Although there are many welcome elements they are overshadowed by proposals which worsen the power imbalance, removing power from communities and handing it to Ministers. Once a major development is included in the national plans and rubber-stamped by Parliament it will be protected from public challenge, and what parliamentary scrutiny there is will most likely be cursory.

The Executive's proposals will mean more efficient decision making. But a system that's more efficient at doing exactly what it's doing now is not what we should be looking for.

Everyone agrees that we need a planning system that works better, but the Executive has failed to recognise that its purpose must change – from chasing short-term GDP growth to securing environmental justice for today, and sustainability for tomorrow's Scottish citizens.

■ *Patrick Harvie is the Scottish Green Party MSP for Glasgow.*

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

To join or request further information, please contact Democratic Left Scotland, Number Ten, 10 Constitution Road, Dundee DD1 1LL. Tel: 01382 819641.

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DO WE REALLY SEEK HAPPINESS?

“HAPPINESS IS ...” is yet another foundational article by David Purdy! – just the kind of authoritative and thought provoking contribution that has made *Perspectives* essential reading.

Especially interesting were the findings that “... up to a per capita income level of \$20,000 a year, as poor countries grow richer their inhabitants grow happier. Above this threshold, however, the correlation breaks down ...” Yet those with obscene wealth aggressively strive for more. They don’t need it but deny it to others and don’t get any happier in the process. Why not?

There’s a story in the US, where a listing of the top ten richest individuals is published every year. One of these wealthy individuals became terribly depressed and spread his misery around until eventually his wife pressed him for an answer – he had dropped down to 11th! So, rather than search for Dave’s “happiness”, men (especially men) fight for status and power derived from wealth in a capitalist jungle – and the devil take the hindmost.

At the risk of oversimplifying the characteristics of human behaviour, this leads me to the question: if human beings only need to achieve a certain “comfort level” for an optimum state of happiness and socialist ideals and goals bring the most good to most people why are they so difficult to achieve? Is it not that individuals and societies are much more complex than we like to think, and that in our efforts to make our appeals easier to understand we make rainbows black and

... if human beings only need to achieve a certain “comfort level” for an optimum state of happiness and socialist ideals and goals bring the most good to most people why are they so difficult to achieve?

white? All very obvious but I think we are deluded into thinking that we know the answers. Therefore let me try and restate this “complexity” in the form of a hierarchy of eight aphorisms and remember that each one has already been described and explained in long bibliographies!

My aim is merely to indicate that we need to understand the human condition without which our search for a better world will remain “pie in the sky” as we continually fail to appreciate the strength of the forces at work within us, as well as within society at large.

1. A human being is a biologically autonomous individual but is especially a social animal, and civilised as a result of historical, cultural, economic and environmental factors.

2. We have two built-in basic drives, to survive and to procreate from which are derived many emotional and behavioural characteristics: many “hardwired” from our evolutionary past as hunter-gatherers and others from a sophisticated upbringing and education.

3. What differentiates us from animals are our language-based abilities to imagine, think abstractly and argue rationally. Most importantly, these are inextricably mixed with our strong emotions and drives.

4. We are born to live as members of ever-widening groups from the family to communities but unequal power relationships lead inevitably to the seeds of conflict between and within groups.

5. Although conflicts of interest are inevitable, violence is not.

6. Those with power, wealth and privilege always strive to retain them but there are no simple solutions to changing the resultant social, economic and political structures towards the betterment of the majority.

7. The tempering of anger, frustration, misery and aggression arising out of social injustice depends on the availability of dialogue and an appreciation of the inherent contradictions, attitudes and behaviour of those involved. The resolution of problems and tensions requires a participatory and not merely a representative democratic structure.

8. We consequently make mistakes in our attempts to organise society, e.g.

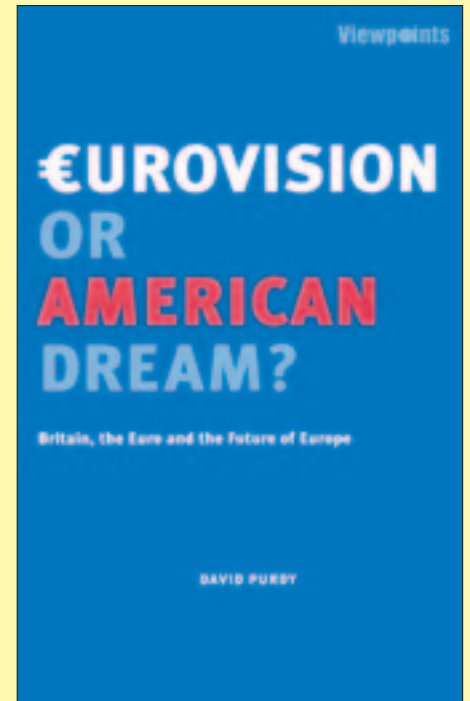
- a) the liberal fallacy that focusses only on attitudes (trying to be nice to everybody/being all things to all people/playing for popularity etc.).
- b) the conservative fallacy that putting a lid on conflict to maintain the status quo is sustainable (thus sacrificing the long term for short-term gain).
- c) the Marxist fallacy that resolving class conflict alone will inevitably lead to a better society (neither will ignoring the class struggle, allowing market fundamentalism to dominate decision-making, while, at the same time, paying lip service to reduce social injustice – Blairism?).

Can we now ask Dave and *Perspectives* to expand this in terms of our radical, feminist and green objectives?

Ray Newton
Edinburgh



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