reform scotland

Melting Pot 2024

About Reform Scotland

Reform Scotland, a charity registered in Scotland, is a public policy institute which works to promote increased economic prosperity, opportunity for all, and more effective public services. Reform Scotland is independent of political parties and any other organisations. It is funded by donations from private individuals, charitable trusts and corporate organisations. Its Director is Chris Deerin and Alison Payne is the Research Director. Both work closely with the Trustee Board, chaired by Jack McConnell, which meets regularly to review the research and policy programme.

Reform Scotland's Trustee Board

- Rt Hon Lord McConnell of Glenscorrodale (Chair)
- Sandy Kennedy
- Anna Macdonald
- Gareth Williams
- Stewart Langdon
- Liz McAreavey

Contents

i. Foreword **Page 4**

1. Spectre of Grocer Tax Raised from Grave to Haunt Scottish Retailers
- David Lonsdale Page 5

2. Structural & bureaucratic obstacles in Scottish comprehensive education
- Euan Mackie Page 7

3. The tangled web of social security
- Jeremy Balfour MSP Page 10

4. The English Education Revolution
- Sarah Atkin Page 12

5. Ideology overruling outcomes on HMP Kilmarnock nationalisation
- Brian Whittle MSP Page 17

6. Dunoon Grammar: An education success story
- Gillian Hunt Page 20

7. Vaccinations & the real risk of not prioritising quality clinical care
- Dr Alastair Noble Page 22

8. The growing homelessness crisis
- David Belfall Page 25

9. Curriculum for Excellence's problematic benchmarks
- Tom Strang Page 28

10. Do we care enough about PISA decline?
- Gordon Hector Page 30

11. Net Zero – Moving the Target
- Stuart Paton Page 33

12. Collaboration: the way forward for Scotland's councils
- Gillian Hunt Page 35

13. Improving the well-being and skills of young people in Scotland by strategic structural change
- Euan Mackie Page 38

14. Enhancing education through collaboration: A call for a unified approach
- Jess Power Page 41

15. The future of the UK's oil and gas industry
- Gabriel Mynheer Page 43

16. Social Bridging Finance
- Kenneth Ferguson Page 46

17. Reforming Scotland's Justice System
- Hamish Robertson Page 49

18. Cross party solution needed to fix Higher Education funding problems
- Elizabeth Smith MSP Page 51

19. Taxing times for the UK Oil and Gas Industry
- Stuart Paton Page 53
20. Where Have All the Children Gone?
- Kenneth Ferguson Page 56
21. We need to make Fatal Accident Inquiries far more effective
- Gillian Mawdsley Page 58
22. Boomtime in McStrategy Land
- Neil Gilmour Page 62
23. Ethical Concerns of the Health & Wellbeing Census
- Lindsay Paterson Page 65
24. Government spending and a whole load of pain
- Johann Lamont Page 68
25. Caledonia Dreaming
- Neil Gilmour Page 73
26. Scotland's Reading Crisis: Hiding in Plain Sight
- Darren Leslie Page 77
27. A Compromise on a Scottish Visa Could Bring Out the Best in Our Politics
- Stephen Gethins Page 80
28. Grangemouth no more ….?
- Stuart Paton Page 83
29. Why we need better statistical data for Scottish education
- Lindsay Paterson Page 86
30. Time to get serious on public sector reform
- Michael Marra Page 89
31. Planning Reform Can Unleash Economic Renewal
- Rob McDonald Page 92
32. Improving Local Democracy in Scotland - Parliament or Council? 25 years of evidence
- Bill Howat Page 95
33. Wha's like us? - Scottish culture on the reopening of Notre Dame
- Neil Gilmour Page 98

Foreword

It's been a busy and successful year for us here at Reform Scotland, as the political temperature has soared and Scottish politics has been properly contested again. There has been a greater focus on policy and an appetite for fresh ideas, especially in the areas where we are most concentrated: education, the NHS and the economy.

Our NHS2048 programme, which brings together a range of experts to look at how the health service can be fixed – perhaps saved is not too strong a word – is having a major impact on the national debate. We are also playing a significant role in the move towards addressing how Scotland's schools can be improved after last Christmas's worrying PISA results, working with the Scottish government and the opposition parties to identify and deliver the necessary measures. Among other issues, we're continuing to press the case for changes to the funding structure for universities and colleges, and against the damaging undermining of local government autonomy.

It's been a good year, too, for Reform Scotland's events programme – particular highlights included our inaugural annual lecture, delivered by Lord Mandelson in October at the RSE, a discussion about Scotland's growing prison population and what might be done to reduce it, and various expert debates around NHS reform.

We've recently launched a partnership with the Mercat Group, an organisation of former council chief executives, to look at how local government might be empowered and improved – there'll be lots more on that in 2025. And our website has expanded to include a comments section, allowing you to engage directly with the articles and reports we publish.

Below, you'll find many articles we've carried on our Melting Pot blog, which range in topic from the energy crisis to social security to homelessness. As ever, if you have something you'd like to say, we're happy to talk to you about carrying your thoughts on our website.

As we move towards 2025, we have major plans for the new year, as Scotland gears up for the next Holyrood election. It's a real chance to deliver better, sharper policy which can improve the condition of the nation. As ever, we're grateful for every engagement we have with you in the Reform Scotland community, and look forward to continuing as the temperature continues to rise.

Chris Deerin
Director

Spectre of Grocer Tax Raised from Grave to Haunt Scottish Retailers – David Lonsdale

Originally posted 15 January 2024

Whilst retailers were trying to deliver a fantastic Christmas for Scotland's shoppers the Finance Secretary Shona Robison instead focused on a New Year tax heist. Hidden away in the small print of her Budget, omitted from Ms Robison's statement to MSPs or any accompanying press release, was a commitment to explore bringing back the euphemistically labelled 'public health supplement'.

The news came as a complete surprise to firms, who had no inkling a new tax was even being considered. It was a reasonable assumption. The SNP's 2021 election manifesto was explicit that they would "ensure that the largest businesses pay the same combined poundage in Scotland as in England". This was reinforced in the government's subsequent Framework for Tax. What we got from the Budget was business rates skyrocketing for firms occupying medium-sized and larger premises, including 4,500 stores, along with this new surtax aimed squarely at larger shops.

Another obvious reason for surprise was the flagrant disregard for the 'New Deal for Business' introduced by the First Minister only last year. This promised 'no surprises' and the involvement of business at the very inception of policy development. When Mr Yousaf said he wanted to 'reset the relationship with business' few anticipated he intended to set it back.

The breaches of the manifesto and pledges on engagement matter. With the economy stagnant and costs ever-rising business leaders need to make informed decisions on where they will get the best and most predicable return on investment. After this difficult Budget it's harder for the most patriotic of us to argue that Scotland is the best place to invest when the government's economic strategy is bedevilled by ad hoc, unpredictable and often contradictory policies. That's why the Scottish Retail Consortium described this Budget as a guddle.

Grocery retailers must be wondering what they have done to deserve this special treatment. In the last four years supermarkets have done immense work in feeding the nation through the pandemic, where they had to battle disrupted supply chains and the whims of government restrictions. They subsequently invested billions in keeping prices under control despite record input inflation due to supply chain issues and the conflict in Ukraine. They were lumbered with a £50 million-plus bill last year when the Scottish Government's troubled deposit return scheme collapsed. Instead of compensation they get threatened with being taxed twice – a new surtax to presumably come on top of this year's bumper 6.7% uplift in business rates. So much for gratitude.

The latter point highlights the philosophical incoherence behind this measure. For the last eight years Scottish Ministers have argued the correct way to manage the negative externalities which result from selling food and drink is through proportionate and

targeted regulation. That includes charges on carrier bags and minimum unit pricing of alcohol. Furthermore, there has been voluntary action by retailers on reformulating products to be healthier, promoting low and no alcohol products, and providing nutritional information on café menus; alongside raising around £80 million in recent years for Scottish good causes through fundraising and donations.

It's reasonable to have an economic strategy in which targeted regulations put a specific cost on businesses and encourage them to adapt. It's also reasonable to have a strategy which says businesses can do what they like but they must pay more tax to cover the negative externalities. To do both will merely deter businesses from investing in Scotland, or in taking the necessary voluntary action which helps improve Scotland's health and wealth.

This isn't just about a modest number of grocery stores. The risk with this surtax on retailers is that could be seen as an opening salvo. If the state of the devolved public finances turns out to be worse than feared then it opens the door to a widening of the scope of the surtax to smaller retailers or other sectors of the economy. Which other sectors will be next in the Ministerial cross hairs if the sums don't add up in twelve months' time?

In many ways the Scottish Budget was an unwelcome return to the past, with the grocery tax a spectre raised from its grave to haunt Scotland's businesses. The previous incarnation of the public health supplement, from 2012 to 2015, left retailers nursing a £95 million headache. It undermined reserves of goodwill amongst business towards the devolved government. Yet the past does contain some good ideas. Rather than thwacking firms with new taxes, Ms Robison should instead descend into the catacombs of St Andrews House and dig out the long-forgotten Crawford Beveridge report into controlling government spending. Businesses have had to cut their cloth in recent years in response to the wider economic turbulence – on this 25th year of devolution it's time for the Scottish Government to do the same.

David Lonsdale is the Director of the Scottish Retail Consortium

Structural & bureaucratic obstacles in Scottish comprehensive education - Euan Mackie

Originally posted 18 January 2024

In Scotland, we have become very good at aspirations in education. However, we should be learning that we don't address long standing structural deficiencies because of endemic bureaucratic mindsets.

The outcomes for Scottish Education through the Curriculum for Excellence (2004 and reaffirmed in 2019) are articulated by the four capacities: successful learners; confident individuals; effective contributors; and responsible citizens. These worthy aims are to 'fully prepare today's children for adult life in the 21st century'.

The Review of Qualifications and Assessment (2023) asked stakeholders their thoughts on reporting the outcomes of education at the senior phase. Young peoples' voices came through clearly in this review, like the expression of the four capacities, that they understood how education should value their personality and achievements. Should it be captured in a Diploma as suggested?

Unfortunately the argument about the timing and nature of senior academic examination qualifications continues to play a dominant role in how our mindset regards the performance of Scottish education, rather than addressing the structural issues which would better deliver competence and wellbeing for all young people at 16. It's a long-standing failure, particularly, for disadvantaged young people in Scotland and arises from 'colonial' mindsets.

I use the term 'colonial', as used by young African students I work with, to describe the impact of hierarchical education on ordinary young people [1]. It is a mindset of those, who have some kind of authority over others, to exert control on those below them, by all manner of means. The result diminishes the agency of those it affects and their growth as independent thinkers, actors and citizens.

The domination of such individuals or bodies in authority may be well intended, but it makes the recipients passively compliant and reliant on others for validation. To envisage a Diploma which tries to capture personal achievement would be another outstandingly time-consuming colonial approach and add a further bureaucratic and psychological intrusive demand on individuals. This would also favour those who already have advantage in opportunities and give them further plaudits from the system.

I reflect on how these colonial hierarchical mindsets have gradually pervaded the whole Scottish educational establishment, from government agencies to the classroom. It involves the paraphernalia of all who wish to make their mark on the system, from politicians, directors, managers, inspectors, administrators and into the school's hierarchy of promoted posts and trade union rules. They dominate attention within the system, often for their own sake and benefits.

I've seen how the status and agency of young people and their families, the supposedly main recipients of education, social services and health, are marginalised, while teacher's workload and expectations have grown. All the bodies, behind their work, have increased in their power and influence, yet they face no question on their collective impact. The Scottish set up is one of empire building at all levels, and rules (just look at the folders in administrators' offices) on how everything has to be done, rather than the prime focus on nurturing personality of young people, family efficacy and community empowerment.

Ask well-intentioned and hard-working head teachers and teachers about their workload and ninety-five percent is of an accumulation of processes which are secondary to relationships with young people in their charge. Ask ordinary Scottish adults and they will tell you of their perception of their failures in education and of being labelled by teachers. The Pisa study reflects this continuing failure of meaningful educational experience for many fifteen-year-olds in basic things like literacy.

Those engaged at the classroom level have their enthusiasm exhausted and feel undervalued in their roles and function. The colonial onslaught nurtures shame, guilt, defensive passivity or rebellion, and has impact on wellbeing for even those who seem successful. Professionalism has become more about protocol compliance than an ability to nurture the young.

The most disadvantaged young people are left at the starting post in school at an early age of 4 ½ and are managed through the system in a resilient attainment gap. The labelling, tracking and target setting of these young people against curriculum levels throughout their school careers (which takes up huge amounts of teacher time and workload) has turned what should have been an enlightened curriculum of experience and mastery of skills, into wasteful treadmills for these young people and their teachers.

So while qualifications and awards of all kinds are indeed important, we need to look at the fuel behind them of young people's sense of meaning and purpose. This is the approach recognised by UNESCO and the OECD in emphasising agency and empowerment of families and young people in their communities. It is often associated with aspirational energised education found in Asia.

Those young Africans, I work with, are full of hope for brighter futures but, interestingly, they don't trust politicians or the establishment to deliver opportunity. They tell me of a new Competency based system of Education in Kenya [2], moving away from teacher and academic dominance towards the needs of ordinary Africans – To focus what ordinary young people can be enabled to do, rather than know. Is this also salient for the Scottish context?

Parents have at their heart, a strong desire for their children to have rich, safe, social experiences with others, along with a growing mastery of their life skills. These are the essential component parts leading to maturity and agency. This is what over bureaucratic and colonial Scottish Education fails to do for a significant group of our young people.

In 2024 we need to analyse and focus on reducing the colonial and top-down thinking in Scottish Education at all levels.

Then we need systemic reform for better pre-school environments, a later entry to primary school with more emphasis on literacy and communication skills for all, an early secondary experience overseen by fewer class teachers and with stronger pastoral experiences, and post 16 senior secondary phases having professional, academic and vocational lines linked with tertiary institutions. These changes to be made relentlessly to work better for all young people's social experiences, skills development and personal agency. Supporting families and re-energising teachers' capacity to do this, should be in tandem with this focus.

Euan Mackie has wide experience of working with children in leadership roles from nursery education through to young people at primary, secondary and university level and has spent over ten years coaching and supporting school leaders. He is currently an Education adviser for the African JED Child Trust Foundation and the Alternatives to Violence Project.

[1] The Jed Child Trust Foundation, Education for every African Child, https://jedchildtrust.org/
[2] The Why, What, and How of Competency-Based Curriculum Reforms: The Kenyan Experience, UNESCO International Bureau of Education (2017).

The tangled web of social security – Jeremy Balfour MSP

Originally posted 25 January 2024

Social Security in Scotland is broken. There is no way to look at the outcomes that we are currently seeing without coming to this conclusion.

As an opposition politician, it would be easy for me to blame the Scottish Government entirely for this mess. They are certainly responsible for the poor execution. But if we step back and look at their ability to deviate from the DWP model, I think it is clear to see that they are limited.

What we currently have is a worst-of-both-worlds situation where some benefits are devolved in Scotland, running up a bill that is fast becoming unsustainable, while the bulk of them remain administered by Westminster. This means that if a Scottish administration wanted to make any kind of meaningful change or reform to the devolved payments, gaps would open up that they do not have the necessary levers to plug. For instance, if they decided to boost high-rate mobility assistance for disabled people, that would mean a cut to one of the other benefits that don't necessarily serve the same group of people. This would lead to a gap that could only be made up by pulling money from another budget, such as education or health.

We also find ourselves in a tangled web of payments from one agency that are contingent on the claimant receiving benefits from the other. This entanglement would make it incredibly complicated to change benefits here in Scotland as it would impact on reserved matters. Any deviation from the DWP system must therefore be careful not to run foul of this problem.

The system is broken. The status quo will not cut it. If we continue down our current path no one wins. The Scottish Government continues to blame Westminster for all failings in Scotland on the basis that they are unable to create the system that they want, and we have to admit that there is a grain of truth in this.

The project of devolution is itself an experiment. No one could clearly foresee what the outcome would be because we were creating a whole new system of government. It is a very live debate within the Conservative Party as to whether the Scottish Parliament itself produces better results for Scotland than direct governance from Westminster, especially on the issue of Social Security. At a philosophical level, we need to decide whether we believe in the idea of localism and that a Scottish system of benefits that deviates from the DWP model would better serve the people of Scotland. The alternative is to hand back all benefits powers to Westminster and allow them to continue with the UK-wide system.

And at the end of the day, that is what the whole argument around social security in Scotland comes down to. It is clear that we are in an untenable middle ground of a carbon copy of the Westminster system with the added complication of a very

expensive extra agency doing the administration. We need change, and it is clear that we have two options. We go further or we go back.

If we are to accept that there is merit in the argument for a uniquely Scottish system of benefits, then we have to carry that through to its logical conclusion of all payments being made at a more local level. Why, then, wouldn't we extend it to Universal Credit, which is the primary arrow that sits in the Social Security quiver.

On the other hand, based on the mess that has been made of devolved benefits, could it make more sense to cut our losses and admit that social security doesn't work on a devolved level?

Whichever we choose, we must do so quickly and decisively. We are in a unique predicament in the world of politics were either choice we make will improve the situation. Both will make the system significantly more efficient as there will be less need for inter-agency cooperation.

The only unacceptable path is inaction.

Either will take time to implement, and those in need in Scotland cannot afford to continue in our current broken system. Therefore, both governments need to get around the table and have a grown-up discussion about which they will choose. Unfortunately, that might be the most difficult part of the process.

Jeremy Balfour is a Scottish Conservative MSP for the Lothian Region and the party's deputy social security, housing and equalities spokesperson.

Jeremy's full report, '5 Years On, Social Security in Scotland', can be read here.

The English Education Revolution – Sarah Atkin

Originally posted 26 January 2024

2024 will represent a significant anniversary for England's education system and, for political reasons in an election year, might not get the spotlight it deserves.

On 1st September 2004, New Labour's first City Academy opened its doors. Mossbourne Community Academy, in the London Borough of Hackney, was built on the site of the former Hackney Downs Grammar.

Hackney Downs had boasted Harold Pinter, Stephen Berkoff and Sir Michael Caine among its alumni but by the 1990's had made national headlines with the label 'Britain's worst comprehensive school.' Amidst controversy and a great deal of political 'heat', it closed its doors in 1995.

I declare a personal interest. I lived in Hackney in the 1990's. I was working on the fringes of politics at that time and was also a School Governor in a local primary school. I was engaged with the fraught debates around Hackney (and inner-city) education in London where there was genuinely an air of fatalism, in contrast to the wonderful positive energy and vitality from the (mostly deprived) children I saw in school every Friday. The Hackney Downs site was near my flat. When it closed, I regularly walked past the empty, sad-looking building and thought to myself how fantastic it would be if somebody with heaps of money were to build an amazing school right here for the children in my school. They deserved the best.

Fast forward a few years, after I'd long departed Hackney for the Highlands, and this had become a reality.

First, some context.

The City Academy 'model' was the Blair government's radical attempt at structural reform of education, specifically inner-city, non-selective, comprehensive education. With the Blair government consumed with a near missionary zeal to improve schools, political debate was (in a nutshell) asking whether a high deprivation/low attainment correlation had to be inevitable. Was it morally right or socially just for the school system (unconsciously or not) to expect less of pupils from challenging backgrounds? Should we try something different to challenge this orthodoxy by putting educators in the driving seat? The government's answer was emphatically, 'yes'.

Academy schools were (and still are) directly funded from central government but the original model was specific to areas of high deprivation in cities to boost educational attainment by liberating the spirit and operational independence of educators and school leaders. The political and educational aims were both ambitious.

Hackney was an area with low levels of educational attainment and high levels of deprivation. Education in Hackney had already been removed from local authority control a number of years before. By 2002, The Learning Trust was handed a 10-year contract to manage education in the authority. The Learning Trust was the UK's first not-for-profit company to take over an entire council education function. Politically, Hackney was a focus for reform; the place to try something new.

Mossbourne Community Academy had a lot riding on it as 'the first'. Much was invested in its success – financially, emotionally (for Hackney parents and their children, for teachers and staff); educationally and politically. The school was sponsored by the late Sir Clive Bourne, a local businessman turned philanthropist who believed passionately in the potential of Hackney's children. The award-winning building was designed by Sir Richard Rogers; the educational philosophy and vision (discipline; pupil safety; high expectations of every student; excellence in teaching and a broad curriculum) very much that of the first Principal, Sir Michael Wilshaw, who later went on to head up the Inspectorate, OFSTED. I'd remained in touch with the Head Teacher where I'd served as a school governor and she told me Mossbourne pupils were walking around Hackney as if they were at Eton! This school was making a statement.

Unlike in the 1990's, the first cohort at Mossbourne made headlines for achieving some of the best GCSE results in England at that (or any) time. Two years later, this was repeated with their 'A' level results. Pupils from Mossbourne were offered Oxbridge places and other Russell Group universities – teenagers from Hackney. It is hard to comprehend the impact this had.

Some cynics put the success story down to Sir Michael Wilshaw's brilliance; the attention focused on the school and the money invested in this project.

Sir Michael was (and remains) an outstanding leader and educator. Here's the thing, though. Almost 20 years after it opened its doors, and long after Sir Michael stepped down, Mossbourne continues its story of outstanding educational success. The hard yards are spent sustaining this level of success, year after year. The subsequent Principals are custodians of an incredible legacy and plainly committed to sustaining the original mission well into the future.

I paid the school a visit recently to see for myself. Out of curiosity, yes, and with a degree of emotion returning to my old haunts. Also, I am now an elected politician who cares passionately about the power of education to change lives and have followed the Mossbourne (and Hackney) stories with interest over the years.

Think on this. Over 40% of Mossbourne pupils are in receipt of free school meals, yet, the Progress 8 'value added' score for the school is 1.23 *(1)*. This means that pupils will achieve at least one grade higher in each qualification at GCSE in this school compared with pupils of similar academic starting points. The Attainment 8 Score for Mossbourne is 63.5% *(2)*. The English average, 46.2%. By every performance measure, disadvantaged pupils at Mossbourne significantly outperform non-disadvantaged pupils in the rest of England, including in Progress 8 and Attainment 8

(astonishingly, disadvantaged children across Hackney outperform non-disadvantaged children in the rest of England too.)

Of the 2023 6th form leavers, 16 secured an Oxbridge place and 62% of the cohort a Russell Group university place, including 8 medics. (The school runs architectural and medical bursary programmes.) I can hear the cries of 'but it's not all about exams'. No, it isn't. The school offers a broad curriculum alongside many extra-curricular opportunities. I saw some incredible artwork and terrific musical facilities. There is also first class SEND provision (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities), with autism a specialism.

It was a privilege to meet the current Principal, whose own career had been nurtured through Mossbourne.

I was shown round by her Assistant and a former pupil who'd returned to the school as an employee. His insights of the school, from the perspective of adulthood were fascinating. Not just discussions of Shakespeare as he loved theatre ('Hamlet' is studied in the equivalent of our S2) but on the discipline. The school is strict. Incredibly so, by most liberal sensibilities. As a teenager he found the expectations of behaviour, and the rigour, difficult. It took time to learn why this was necessary and that it did have a purpose. Despite the struggle, he knew the teachers always had his back. They cared. That's what made the difference in him embracing the educational opportunities; teachers not giving up.

High expectations of behaviour, with instant consequences for transgressions and no excuses, is not often perceived as a form of equality, but it is. Consistency in behaviour management right across the school is also a demonstration of teacher solidarity. The school prioritises safety. Clear boundaries and set routines are one part of that agenda.

Also, I noticed the school was quiet and calm. Pupils moving between lessons without fuss or distraction. I thought how much better these quiet corridors must be for vulnerable pupils, autistic pupils or anyone with sensory issues. A different take on 'inclusive practice' in action.

This is not an easy school. Outside the school gates lie enormous social and economic challenges, the same as every inner-city school. I did not meet parents but presumably, they all know what the school is about and sign up for the behaviour standards and academic rigour.

Now, Mossbourne's philosophy does have its critics. It will not be everybody's choice of school. This blog is not to advocate for a right or wrong way to run a school. What I do know, however is that for Hackney families, it has been working for nearly 20 years.

My key point is that there is a diversity of provision in England. Could there ever be a Mossbourne, or similar in Scotland in the state sector? The Academy 'model' was all about educators being given the freedom to innovate and the autonomy and

responsibility to get on with it, including having the freedom to recruit (a freedom which to anybody running an organisation is a no-brainer, yes?)

Good schools become great schools because of the calibre of the leadership and teachers. If we invest in our teachers and school leaders then what sense is there in 'boxing' them in? They need maximum creative freedom and the authority to do their job.

Being an Academy school is, of course not a panacea. Given 80% of schools in England are now Academy schools, there will be successful and less successful schools. This, however is surely a better problem to have than a system that is formally equitable – with everything the same – but with inequitable outcomes, based mainly on socio-economic status, i.e. where you start is where you end up.

Aside from Mossbourne Academy, the wider Hackney education story over the past 25 years is truly remarkable and worthy of far greater attention. From the days when the local authority lost the right to manage the service, its educational performance now ranks amongst the very best in the UK – in an area with high levels of deprivation.

The deprivation ranking for Hackney may have improved from 2010 (2nd most deprived borough in England) to 2020 (where it ranks 22nd) but this is still significant. Hackney is extremely deprived in the domain of barriers to housing and services and has a high child poverty rank AND YET, it is significantly less deprived in the education domain (at 229th). So, this education revolution has broken the correlation between poverty and low educational attainment. A story repeated across London.

With 2024 an election year, this anniversary does feel like a turning point for the Academy movement. The thing about something that is working well is politicians too often cannot resist the urge to meddle. It did take political will to drive through reform in England's schools but many have short memories and take for granted what can so easily be lost. It is always worth remembering that children from deprived backgrounds rarely get second chances. School is their one shot at opportunity and the chance of a better life.

As Scotland comes to terms with PISA, I feel we can learn from England's experience of the past 20 years. The good and not so good. Plainly, our reform agenda hasn't delivered on its promise. The evidence is screaming this at us. That does not mean everything is wrong. There is a lot that is good. We invest heavily in our teachers and, as a society, value teaching as a profession. Scotland has always placed great value on a holistic and inclusive approach to education – with breadth as a hallmark. Yet, things aren't moving in the right direction.

Is it standards or structures holding us back? Was it the imposition of a philosophy and a pedagogy from "on high" that is strangling the creative potential of our educators to do their job? Is the bureaucratic landscape too cluttered – national, regional, local? Should the bureaucracy just get out of the way more?

I do not pretend to know the answers, but perhaps a good starting point would be to allow our teachers and Head Teachers to speak openly and publicly about how education looks from their vantage point. Transformation is possible. Hackney has proved it.

Sarah Atkin is a member of the Commission on School Reform and an independent Councillor on Highland Council. She is writing in a personal capacity.

- *Progress 8 is a 'value-added' measure to ascertain where a pupil starts at secondary level and the impact of school on their attainment, e.g. a +1 score shows that students in that school achieved one grade higher in each qualification at GCSE.*
- *Attainment 8: schools in England receive a score based on how well pupils have performed in up to 8 qualifications. These include English, maths, 3 EBacc subjects and 3 other approved qualifications*

.

Other statistics referenced were taken from:
Department for Education
https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/department-for-education/about/statistics
https://get-information-schools.service.gov.uk/Establishments/Establishment/Details/134693
Hackney Council
www.hackney.gov.uk/statistics-evidence-plans-and-strategies (Hackney Profile 2020)

Ideology overruling outcomes on HMP Kilmarnock nationalisation – Brian Whittle MSP

Originally posted 2 February 2024

When we think of prisons, most of us rely on TV to have an idea of what they're really like and, in most cases the fictional version isn't the most accurate depiction. Over my years as an MSP, I've made fairly regular visits to HMP Kilmarnock, one of only two prisons in Scotland currently run under contract by a private sector firm. In the case of HMP Kilmarnock, it was built under a Private Finance Initiative (PFI) and has been operated by Serco since 2002, when they bought the previous provider, on a 25-year contract which expires in March this year.

As long ago as 2019, the then Justice Secretary Humza Yousaf was pledging at a meeting of the Prison Officers Association that both HMP Kilmarnock, and HMP Addiewell (the other private prison in Scotland) would both be brought into public ownership when their contracts expired. Now, for Kilmarnock, that time is approaching rapidly, and the question being asked by Serco, the prison staff and many of my MSP colleagues is, why?

For the Scottish Government, the answer is obvious. *"We have always maintained that prisons should be managed by the public sector and not run for profit by private companies. That is why private prisons will come into public ownership after their contracts expire."*

That's a comment from a Scottish Government spokesperson in 2019, when the decision to nationalise HMP Kilmarnock was first announced, and it's still the line taken today. No suggestion that the prison's performance is worse than it's publicly run counterparts. No indication that the taxpayer would save money if the prison was publicly owned. Just a flat statement that amounts to "Private = bad. Public = good." If ever there was a more obvious example of ideology overruling outcomes by this Scottish Government, I've yet to see it.

The inherent belief in the superiority of public ownership has always been a theme for the Scottish Government and one that's not always borne out by evidence. From Ferguson Marine to BiFab, to ScotRail to Prestwick Airport we see entities which could, and in my view should, be in the private sector, nationalised only to see their performance suffer and vast quantities of public money ploughed into them. I fear the same will be true for HMP Kilmarnock.

Unlike many of the other nationalised entities I mentioned above, HMP Kilmarnock is no failed business. Far from it, it is widely recognised by politicians of all colours, as having done excellent work. For years it has worked with various community organisations, such as Centrestage and Recovery Enterprises, bringing them into the prison and allowing them to work with prisoners before and after their release. The prison also supports the community more widely, with a contractual obligation to spend 10% of its revenue in the local area; a commitment which ends with the contract in March. And years before the Scottish Government spent millions trying to give

prisoners access to mobile phones during the pandemic, HMP Kilmarnock had long since installed landlines in all its cells; an action which helped to reduce re-offending and improve the mental health of prisoners and something that Reform Scotland had been calling for.

It's worth noting here too that the departure of Serco from the prison doesn't come with a seamless transition for staff. The Scottish Prison Service has said it doesn't pay Serco for the 56 body worn cameras used at the prison so when Serco goes, so do the cameras. That means the number of body worn cameras available across Scotland's 17 prisons will drop from 84 to 28. At the same time, the in-house psychology, education and housekeeping staff currently on payroll will become sub-contractors, as will the prison's 4 drug detection dogs.

Nor will the transfer save the public money. HMP Kilmarnock is one of the least expensive prisons in the UK to run at a cost of around £16m to the Scottish Government annually. It's been reported that the nationalisation will increase costs by up to £5m and that because of differences in staff contracts, the prison may need to recruit dozens of extra officers. At the time of writing, there are also serious questions about when current Serco staff will be moved over to be paid at the same rate as their existing SPS counterparts, with suggestions the transition may be slowed to save money.

Perhaps most frustrating of all to me is the fact that Serco had previously offered to build a new block at the prison at no cost to the public, but this was summarily rejected by the Scottish Government. Considering the rising costs for new prisons in Inverness and Glasgow and the prison inspectorate reporting that 6 prisons providing accommodation for about 35% of our prison population are "ill-suited to a modern prison system", that is a decision which verges on negligence.

To be clear, I am not advocating wholesale privatisation of everything that isn't nailed down, but I reject this notion that the private sector has nothing to offer in the delivery of some services. This ideologically driven belief that public ownership, even if it costs more and the outcomes aren't as good, must be the preferred route, is not only illogical, but also pretty clearly putting the political interest above the public interest.

While I recognise there are always going to be those who simply cannot abide the idea of any public service being delivered with a profit motive, first and foremost, governments must prioritise achieving the best outcomes. In prisons, that must be the protection of the public, reducing reoffending and rehabilitating prisoners. HMP Kilmarnock has achieved all of these outcomes, and it's done so at a lower cost to the taxpayer than other prisons in Scotland, often by being well ahead of the Scottish Prison Service in its actions.

I know how easy it is for any debate on public vs private to end up with the hardliners on either side trading examples of each other's failures or accusing the other of wanting to nationalise or privatise everything. However, to allow that to be the extent of the debate we have on this subject is letting the public down.

In recent weeks I've held a members debate in Holyrood about HMP Kilmarnock and asked the Justice Secretary directly what evidence was for the Scottish Government's decision to nationalise the prison rather than re-tender the contract. On both occasions, she could cite nothing but the Scottish Government's policy against prisons being run for profit. At a time when the Scottish Government is struggling to finance much needed improvements in the prisons it already operates, opting to spend more funds nationalising another which is working well risks looking more than a little self-indulgent.

The Scottish Government are constantly at pains to talk about how much budget pressure they are under, but at the same time, they're intent on making this decision to spend more and very probably get less.

Privitisation is far from the solution to every problem, but I see no evidence to suggest that nationalisation of HMP Kilmarnock will solve any problem, even if it was clear what problem the SNP were trying to solve.

As the old saying goes, *"if it ain't broke, don't fix it."*

Brian Whittle is a Scottish Conservative MSP for the South of Scotland region

Dunoon Grammar: An education success story – Gillian Hunt

Originally posted 6 February 2024

At a time when there only seems to be bad news about schools and education in the media, the need to find out what is working, explore success models, ask questions, evaluate and learn is all the more important.

Dunoon Grammar School (DGS) is one such success story. In 2022 the school won the T4 Education prize for being the best school in the world for community engagement. I wrote about the school in my report, 'High Dunoon' which was published by Reform Scotland in May 2023 and then featured in the Scotsman and the Oban Times. I am now delighted that tonight, Tuesday 6 February, there will be a Members' Debate in Parliament celebrating the work of Dunoon Grammar School and its approach to collaboration with their immediate and wider community. It is clear that Dunoon Grammar School demonstrates that a school can be the heart of, and make a significant difference to, its community. Lessons can be learned throughout Scotland from the successful partnership between Dunoon Grammar School and Argyll and Bute Council. The foreword of my report noted that, "*in a Dunoon context the word "community" is widely cast…an exemplary environment for young people to learn, grow, find future opportunities, and contribute their own ideas. Teachers are encouraged to think for themselves, and take an "outward looking" approach to their job. External partners in the public, third and private sectors have become part of the DGS family. At the heart of all this is head teacher David Mitchell, who emerges as a local hero. A former DGS pupil himself, he has returned to the school and driven a revolution in culture and environment, one that has allowed staff and pupils to flower.*"

Two examples of Dunoon Grammar's community approach are the Dunoon Project and their newly acquired derelict toy library building.

The Dunoon Project is a public, private and community venture which the school is at the heart of. The project aims to attract visitors, create employment and boost the wider economy through plans for a cable car from the sea to Kilbride Hill, a café, zip-wire and a world-class mountain bike trail. One of its two advisory boards comprises DGS students of all ages. Brendon Wallace, one of the Directors, sees the importance of collaboration with the school. The community wants to see young people stay in the town and increase its population, which the project will help to achieve.

The empty toy library, owned by the local authority, which sat just outside the school has become part of the school's footprint with plans for it becoming a new community building and garden, for example adult learning classes delivered by young people, a garden run by the school's Learning Centre and a community café where young people can learn skills for future life. The main challenge for the school is financing the creation of this exciting new facility and ensuring that it is sustainable moving forward.

Much of what happens at DGS happens in other schools. However, there is pervading belief, which manifests into action, that everybody in the school and its community does whatever it takes to enable their children and young people to thrive. The school

is at the heart of the community and it is Head Teacher, David Mitchell who has made this happen. He has empowered all in the school to do this alongside him. Everyone has permission to act, knowing that David has their back. This is also true of Argyll and Bute Council: David is able to act in the best interests of the school and its community and they have his back.

Dunoon's success is also evident in its statistics. Positive destinations stand at 98.11%, above that of their virtual comparator, Argyll and Bute, the Northern Alliance and the National Establishment. Attainment is going up year on year, although like other schools the pandemic has had an impact. Involvement in a pilot addressing non-attendance (ANA), developed by the Educational Psychology team to support schools to identify specific reasons for non-attendance, is enabling appropriate interventions to be implemented to support attendance and allows for strong partnerships with outside agencies that support young people and their families. Procedures have been introduced to keep the exclusion rate down with staff following an intervention package to ensure the needs of the young people are met.

It is of note that what is happening at Dunoon Grammar happens without additional resources or special measures or permissions. If it can happen here, it can happen anywhere. And there are some key messages for others about the school's approach: challenge thinking and norms; empower pupils, staff, parents and partners, allow all to lead, and support them to take risks; listen to success stories and learn from them; invite your community into your school, ask for their help and be committed to helping your community to grow and develop; engender in everyone a feeling of belonging to the school; and allow your school to be an asset for its community.

Despite its success, Dunoon Grammar School still faces challenges, like all other schools, such as equity to education, ensuring vulnerable pupils have access to relevant resources, young people's mental health, teacher shortage and of course budget constraints. However, even with these challenges, DGS continues to offer young people the best possible learning experience.

Empowered head teachers and schools, like Dunoon Gramma School are exactly what Scottish education needs if the problems within our system are to be replaced with solutions. We need to explore innovative models: talk about them and learn from them to support schools and local authorities to thrive.

In the debate I hope that MSPs will consider what the relationship be between a school and its community should be, and that if we want the community in the school what we need to do to make that happen. They should also consider the kind of leadership a school needs to operate in the way DGS operates and how that can be grown and supported. We know that schools and the public sector cannot do it all alone so consideration needs to be given to the supportive role that can be played by the third and private sectors. It would be helpful to think about the barriers to collaboration and how local authorities and schools can be supported to overcome these.

Gillian Hunt is an educational consultant and former teacher.
The Official Report from the Members' Debate on Tuesday 6 February can be read here.

Vaccinations & the real risk of not prioritising quality clinical care
– Dr Alastair Noble

Originally posted 7 February 2024

Vaccinations work. The last outbreak of Polio in Nairn was in 1959. As a GP I still had to help those damaged by the disease cope with the long-term disabilities they suffered from.

Why then are we looking at the recurrence of completely avoidable infectious diseases in infants?

How can we have allowed contractual discussions and agreements between the Scottish Government and the Scottish BMA to put our infant population at risk?

The combination of effective vaccines and herd immunity has meant when I was examining an infant with an infectious disease, I could reasonably assume that they were vaccinated or at least had the benefit of herd immunity and could discount some really serious infective diseases.

But not now. For me it would be like being back in Nepal in 1973, I would have to consider in my differential diagnosis some extremely dangerous and potentially fatal diseases. I vividly remember a father carrying his oldest son to our hospital, where we did an emergency tracheostomy and saved his life. His 4 younger brothers had all died from the same condition-Diphtheria. A simple course of vaccinations would have saved them all.

So why are we seeing immunisation rates in the low 80% when we know we need the high 90% for herd immunity?

We simply failed to understand and prioritise that the main role of a health service is to keep our population as healthy as possible. Vaccination, especially of all our infants, is a proven, tried and trusted way of making sure we offer the best possible start to our infants on their journey to be healthy, wealthy and wise.

Certainly, in Nairn there was a real determination to ensure that all our infants were fully immunised. That team effort involved everybody from Health Visitors, practice staff, GPs and especially the parents. We all worked together to give our infants the best possible start.

The GPs in Nairn have not routinely been giving the injections themselves for many years. Occasionally our receptionist team would flag up that Jimmy or Jeannie had not had their injections and could vaccinate them when they they were in with a parent. This was not a workload issue for us. We know that continuity of care works. We know that Nairn Healthcare was recognised UK wide as one of the Practices who coped best with Covid-for example vaccinating over 800 patients in a single day for example.

Who decided that Nairn Healthcare should not be allowed to continue giving this essential and vital service? Why have we had to fight so long and so hard to continue, or now reintroduce doing what works?

The problems have been repeatedly raised locally and nationally. Dr Jenny Wares, acting in her professional capacity as a public health consultant raised concerns in her paper to the Health Board.

Dr Ross Jaffrey from Beauly, in another excellent paper, showed the effect that this constant undermining of General Practice and Community Care is resulting in poorer health outcomes for individuals and our communities. As a result of his paper our local MSP, Fergus Ewing, issued a press statement which made the front page of the Herald on Saturday January 27,2024.

I cannot improve on his diagnosis of what is wrong or explain more clearly what has gone so disastrously awry.

Fergus Ewing's press release read as follows:
"T*hese statistics give serious cause for concern. The low uptake of MMR vaccine in particular could lead, as Nairn GP Adrian Baker has said, to a preventable tragedy*.

"*The problem is because of bureaucracy, pure and simple. The 2018 GP contract required vaccination and other services to be taken from GPs and handed to Health boards. Their schemes are rigid, more difficult for people to access, and more expensive. Fewer folk get their vaccinations for Measles and Flu' — but despite the service being worse, it actually costs far more: it costs £4M a year more in the Highlands, according to the NHS Highlands own internal report.*

"The NHS top Management both in Highland and Edinburgh know this fine well, and I have pressed them and the Scottish Government, without success, for the past two years to permit GP practices in Highland to resume provision of these services.
"This has already been permitted in the Inner Hebrides I believe. But they thus far have blocked this for the rest of the Highlands despite similar problems of distance travel costs lack of public transport and so on which have caused the lower vaccination uptake.

"Whilst I had an amicable meeting with the First Minister when he was Health Secretary, it led nowhere, and my later request to meet his successor , Michael Matheson was rejected. I am now to try once again to get a meeting with him, and Dr Baker on the basis of these shocking statistics.

"Perhaps in the light of these statistics being publicised, at long last the Scottish Government and Health Managers will finally take heed of what Dr Baker, campaigners in Nairn led by retired GP Alastair Noble, and myself have been telling them?

"There is a means to vary the GP contract , and this has been used for the islands in Argyllshire, but my impression is that the Senior Health Officials in Edinburgh have essentially put pressure on the NHS Highland Management not to rock the boat; Even though GP practices as in Nairn and elsewhere in the Highlands would want to resume

provision of these services and that they believe very strongly that this is indubitably in the best interests of their patients.

"This is sadly a perfect and shameful example of a giant and unaccountable bureaucracy failing to listen to people on the ground and imposing on the Highlands and Rural Scotland a metropolitan designed model of service provision . These statistics now prove that the system is failing my constituents and demonstrate that there is now, in the view of the GPs I have dealt with a potentially serious risk to public health. I regret that it is necessary for me to speak out in these strong terms – but that is my plain duty as constituency MSP, and my job. If my constituents had wanted a doormat they would have gone to B and Q!" Fergus Ewing MSP

What then do we all need to do to get this sorted ASAP?

We now have the Scottish BMA supportive and willing to negotiate with the Scottish Government.

The local GPs in Nairn and elsewhere in the Highlands are willing to restart giving these services.

The local population are clearly saying, for example through our discussions at Community Council level and with our Local Councillors, that we must prioritise local services-fit for purpose and locally accountable and responsible.

We can now see clearly that the original 2018 contract did allow for local solutions to be found-one size does not need to fit all!

Following local pressure with full support from Fergus Ewing and widespread publicity, we now are seeing local negotiations between our Local Medical Committee and Highland Health Board with the support of the Scottish BMA. This was discussed at First Minister's Questions last week and we now appear to have an understanding that the priority is to make sure all our infants are vaccinated.

Delivering a Vaccination service to our infants and by definition and extension all who live in their natural locality could just be the tipping point.

We can then prioritise Integrated Health and Social Care Provision in all of Scotland. Allied to Fair Share budgets and the right sizing of essential Specialist Care, we might just deliver the NHS 2048 model of the best Health and Social Care in the world. We have the right skills, workforce and clinical and financial data to deliver this.

Reform Scotland are arguing for a National Conversation to make our NHS and Social Care Services-Integrated, productive and value for money.

Can we find the political honesty and will to deliver?

Dr Alastair Noble worked as a GP in Nairn and was awarded an MBE for his work in integrating Health and Social Care in Nairnshire

The growing homelessness crisis – David Belfall

Originally posted 20 March 2024

In my 2018 blog for Reform Scotland, I commented on the Scottish Government's commitment to "ending" homelessness in Scotland. How are they doing?

The recent Reform Scotland event with Paul McLennan, the latest Housing Minister, provided an opportunity to explore this, as well as to do some reflective thinking about the realistic prospects for homelessness, and the provision of social housing (by which I mean housing partly or wholly funded from the public purse) in Scotland.

On homelessness the red lights are certainly flashing. To highlight a few: –

1. Edinburgh, Glasgow and Argyll and Bute local authorities have declared "housing emergencies".
2. The number of children living in temporary accommodation is just short of 10,000 – a 130% increase from 2014.
3. Following a thematic review of homelessness by the Scottish Housing Regulator published in February 2023, an update in December said that there is "systemic failure" in the services provided to people who are homeless by some councils and there is a heightened risk in other councils.
4. The Scottish Budget for 2024/25 included a £200M reduction in the housing budget, provoking an excoriating response from Shelter in which they accused the Scottish Government of "pricing in a rise in homelessness". The white-hot heat of their critique can only be appreciated by reading their response in full on the Shelter website. Moreover, as Alex Neil has noted in his NHS 2048 article for Reform Scotland, cuts "to the housing budget will put even more pressure on the NHS, as the people affected suffer avoidable physical and mental health problems".

The initiatives which Paul McLennan outlined at the Reform Scotland event (including the new short life Housing Investment Task Force and the Empty Homes partnership), though no doubt individually worthy, do not begin to match the scale of the problem. While they provide something of a script for the Scottish Government between now and the Holyrood elections in 2026, the plain fact is that more public investment is needed, and needed now. Without it the current homelessness situation will get even worse.

The problem is essentially one of supply and demand. On the demand side Scotland has progressive homelessness legislation which enables those in housing need to apply to a council for permanent accommodation. Demand has exceeded supply for many years. Poverty and the cost of living are important factors. Thus, demand is currently rising rather than falling. This has been exacerbated by the need to find accommodation for Ukrainian refugees.

The most acute shortfall in supply as compared with demand has always been in Glasgow and a new source of demand is a significant factor in the city (and to a certain

extent in the other Scottish cities). The accelerated Home Office programme for dealing with asylum applications means that successful applicants are now able to apply for permanent accommodation. Glasgow City Council has estimated that in 2023/24 alone this is likely to result in 1,000 additional applications. (Figures for Scotland as a whole are not available, nor for future years.) However, given the limited stock of permanent accommodation available to local authorities, it is very unlikely that many of these additional applicants will in fact be found permanent accommodation. Instead, they will remain in temporary accommodation – hotels, B&Bs and short term lets (where available). Moreover, except in the highly improbable event that the Home Office can be persuaded to foot the accommodation bill for those who have completed the asylum application process, the cost of the temporary accommodation will transfer from the Home Office to the local authority, with adverse consequences for funding other housing priorities.

On the supply side, the reduction in housing funding in both the 2023/24 and the 2024/25 Budgets will inevitably result in a reduction in new build social housing. Based on figures provided by Registered Social Landlords (RSLs), a report published by the Scottish Housing Regulator in December 2023 predicted a reduction from the 30,000 homes projected in 2022 for the 5 years from 2022/23 to 26,000 for the 5 years from 2023/24 – to be funded primarily by £2.45 billion of social housing grant (51% of total cost) and £2.0 billion of private finance (42%). And this projection of 26,000 can be expected to decline further following the recent Budget. Moreover, it will fall further still if RSLs are required to deliver new Green initiatives such as decarbonisation without commensurate additional funding.

The shortfall in the supply of permanent accommodation as compared with demand is shown by the number of households in temporary accommodation, as recorded by councils in response to applications under the housing legislation. On 30 September 2023 this stood at 15,625 households – a 10% rise on the previous year. These households included 9,860 children – an 8% rise. The figures do not include asylum applicants living in temporary accommodation funded by the Home Office. Nor do they include rough sleepers, who are very difficult to count. (Occasional ground counts have been attempted but these are only practical in city centres and even then depend on a close knowledge of where rough sleepers might be.)

I am sure that as Housing Minister Paul McLennan – plainly a decent guy – will have made a case for an increase in the housing budget to his Ministerial colleagues in the pre-budget discussions, but he failed. And he failed not only to achieve an increase but even to achieve a standstill. Let us assume that his colleagues accepted that access to decent housing is a fundamental human right and that they were aware of the long-established links between decent housing on the one hand and good health (both physical and mental) and child development on the other. Even so, they turned Paul down because they did not give housing sufficient priority in comparison with other spending programmes. In Shelter's words "the government has chosen roads, policing, prisons and playparks over safe and secure housing for children" and "the Scottish government are pricing in a rise in homelessness as an acceptable price worth paying to protect initiatives such as the Scottish National Investment Bank".

What a bitter pill it must be for Shelter (and other homelessness organisations) to realise that after 50 years of campaigning, the achievement of much in terms of housing legislation and despite the increasing complaints from councils (backed up by the Scottish Housing Regulator) about their inability to deliver, access to decent housing still does not command the priority at national level which it deserves. What more can they do?

What is left by way of a credible strategy for the building of more social housing and the reduction of homelessness? Does it amount to any more than good intentions, media-friendly announcements, speculative initiatives (such as the Housing Investment Task Force) and targets way ahead in the future and beyond the political lifespan of our current day politicians? Is it their calculation that even worse homelessness statistics will not carry such weight with the electorate as to affect their election prospects? Questions such as these can lead on to some depressing reflections on the inability of our political system to deliver the sustained effort, commitment and investment needed for real change in dealing with long term social problems.

But I am going wider than my particular subject and will end on a slightly more hopeful note. It is to Paul McLennan's credit that, though unable to deliver it himself, he accepted the need for more social housing. He said that he sees the answer as lying in "systemic change" and that Professor Duncan Maclennan agrees with him. Professor Maclennan is well known in the housing world and respected by many for his ability to provide innovative proposals. It is quite a challenge to produce proposals for "systemic change" which will both survive the scrutiny of the housing professionals and prove palatable to the politicians. But, if anyone can do it, Professor Maclennan is your man. Over to you, Duncan!

Before retiring in 2002 David Belfall was Head of the Housing and Area Regeneration Group at the Scottish Executive (as it then was), at the time of the first Rough Sleepers Initiative in Scotland and the Homelessness Task Force. He is currently a Board member of Ark Housing Association, a Registered Social Landlord. David is writing in a personal capacity.

Curriculum for Excellence's problematic benchmarks - Tom Strang

Originally posted 27 March 2024

I'm passionate about Scottish Education and though I've been away from the chalkface for 17 years, I still like to think I can offer some kind of advice as to what has gone wrong and what steps might be taken to reverse the decline as shown in the recent Pisa Tests.

I believe that a curriculum, based on skills only, cannot stand up to scrutiny without the relevant knowledge needed to develop and build these skills.

And that is where the problem lies.

In 2011, we at TeeJay Publishers received, as every other teacher did, a loose set of (basically) skills by the Scottish Government pertaining to each Level, Early, First and Second, and like all in education, eagerly awaited the breakdown of the knowledge which should be appended to each level and which would have allowed teachers to concentrate on what the Government expected them to teach.

That information came around about 2017 with the "benchmarks". Six years after Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) was introduced! TeeJay realised in 2011 that a contents list for each level was unlikely to be produced any time soon, but it was that six year gap that primarily caused every teacher in every Primary school in Scotland to struggle in their attempts to create a working curriculum for their own class, in some cases devoid of the knowledge attained by the class before them or the one following on.

Chaos ensued with multiple opinions on what was actually expected of them to teach. With that in mind, as we began in 2011 to create our CfE Textbooks and support materials, we first of all created a curricular overview in which we expanded and detailed exactly what we at TeeJay believed would be expected of pupils in order to attain the knowledge (and skills) for each Level, Early to Four, and we supplied this overview free, via our web-site, to every school in Scotland. It was downloaded thousands of times. This was in 2011/2012.

When the "benchmarks" were eventually produced around 2017, they were remarkably similar (95%) to our own curricular overview.

We made a mistake though and I see that now.

The trouble with giving a detailed contents list for Level 1 (P2-4) and Level 2 (P5-7) was that is was geared to the end-points. i.e. P4 and P7.

What we should have done, and what I'm suggesting now, is that a detailed contents list should have been created for EACH year-group and the reason for that is as follows.

The pressure to gain a Level 1 or Level 2 “pass” at present rests entirely on the P4 and P7 class teacher. These of course can be assessed using National Tests or in fact using our “End of Level Diagnostic Assessments”.

The problem with that is that nowhere in P2, P3, P5 or P6 is there any real expectation of where a class, or an individual child, should be on the journey to complete the relevant Level.

Why are pupils in England, who were 10 points behind us in Maths in 2006, now over 20 points (1 year) ahead of us in 2022, according to Pisa ?

Our Scottish resources were extremely successful and by 2018, we were supplying textbooks and support packs to almost every Primary and Secondary school in Scotland from ages 5 to 18.

In 2014, we decided to produce similar resources for England and I began to look at the new National curriculum being produced. I knew at that time, that the former curriculum up to that point was very vague and standards there were behind us, thanks at that time to Scotland’s fairly well prescribed 5-14 detailed set of course outlines.

What I realised in their new curriculum was that unlike Scotland’s vague curricular “guidelines”, England’s course details were extremely well proscribed and not only that, they detailed exactly where each year-group were expected to be and in fact they provided pertinent assessment materials for each teacher to follow and apply.

Though our books did not take off – (we were too small and did not have the marketing skills to make inroads), other English based publishers began to create knowledge based resources that appeared to have raised the standards in English schools.

I believe it was the detailed descriptors for each year-group and the inbuilt assessment programme insisted upon, that improved the teaching of Maths in English schools and I also believe, we can make inroads in tackling the fall in Standards in Scottish schools over, in particular, the last 10-12 years.

Back in the 90’s, my wife remembers Renfrewshire’s “Red Book” which was a list of topics, their depth and when they had to be taught. She also, as a Head Teacher, came up with 40 week planners for her staff, detailing a whole year’s teaching plan.

I no longer have any connection to the TeeJay Resources being produced as we passed on that mantle when we sold TeeJay to Hodder in 2019.

Tom Strang was a maths teacher for nearly 40 years, ending as PT Maths at Clydebank High School for 20 years. In 1994 he set up TeeJay Maths with his brother John and friends Jim Geddes and James Cairns (maths teachers). Latterly TeeJay were the largest suppliers of maths Textbooks and support packs, selling to over 95% of all Scottish Schools from aged 5 to aged 18.

Do we care enough about PISA decline? - Gordon Hector

Originally posted 12 April 2024

The latest edition of the Oxford Journal of Education has a study looking at reactions to Scotland's declining results in the international PISA education survey. People in government, councils, and semi-official bodies were interviewed giving their take.

It's worth looking at this in some detail, to get an insight into the response of official Scotland to PISA.

"And that reaction has been, with some notable exceptions, a collective shrug of the shoulders"

One argument, for example, is that PISA doesn't match up with the aspirations of the Curriculum for Excellence to create broad-minded, well-formed young people.

Take a parent representative quoted arguing that '*Scottish education values more than just what is measured in PISA such as being more compassionate, having better communication skills, and continuing to learn regularly.*'

Or a union leader pondering if '*we want our young people to pass these tests, or do we want them to engage with a wider, more socially just curriculum*?.'

This is fascinating. Scotland used to have a real sense of exceptionalism founded on academic quality. Our highers were hard and our teachers were harder.

Now we have a different kind of exceptionalism, focused on values.

It's tempting to point out that PISA is also pretty underwhelming for the soft stuff, too. Our pupils are less lonely at school than the international average, for example – but then the rate of children who are frequently bullied at school is roughly 20% higher than other countries. More compassionate, eh?

But that kind of misses the point. Why not have academic excellence *and* broad-minded citizens keen on social justice? Is it really a choice between the two?

You can see that point in the tests themselves. Far from being super-abstract, the PISA tests are geared towards real-world examples. In fact, PISA's tests describe a minimum level of competence to take part in society – the very definition of social inclusion. In Scotland, about a third of our pupils don't meet that standard for maths. In reading it's one-fifth, and science, one-quarter. The first two of those numbers have declined since 2018.

So is there a choice between good PISA scores and a socially just curriculum? No. Only if you think taking part in society is not a matter of justice.

Surely no-one thinks that – and we should assume that all the people quoted in this paper are speaking in good faith. But the perceived issues with PISA feel a bit like people convincing themselves we're somehow exempt from this kind of international survey.

One central government official, for example, argues that '*some of the things appear in the PISA assessment are not taught in Scottish maths programme until children are older than 15.*'

Who knows if this is true. It has the feel of anecdata. But you can plainly read this the other way round: if other countries' children are getting to the hard bits before ours, isn't that…a sign that our children are behind others?

Or listen to another parent organisation arguing that the '*PISA data consist of a small sample of students. Data are also cross-sectional, which means different students are assessed in every wave'* and therefore cannot be trusted.

As the paper authors point out, this is just factually not true. That's not how PISA works. It's not how any social research works.

Or a teacher representative arguing that '*if teachers in Scotland had 20 in their classes as other countries do, maybe the results would be different.'*

Except PISA *does* have data about class sizes and resources. That also allows us to see some interesting stuff – such as the evidence about the impact of class sizes being really very mixed. It also shows a really interesting result: the UK does have larger class sizes at secondary (25 pupils vs 23 average). But PISA also asks headteachers if they think teacher shortages are undermining teaching. In Scotland, relatively *fewer* pupils are in schools where that is the case.

These comments build up a picture of not engaging with PISA. Or not wanting to. As if it just doesn't apply: *oh, you wouldn't know our curriculum – it goes to a different school.* Let's again, forgive that. People are busy. PISA methodology is hardly bedtime reading. But it's hard not to worry when it's education specialists. Three central officials sent a combined response to the paper researchers, pointing to the Scottish Government's official position which takes PISA seriously. Good for them. But look at this quote from another, about whether PISA could be used to measure CfE's success:

"*I don't think it's [PISA] a valid measure. And I would say the same of the Scottish Survey of Literacy and Numeracy. It's exactly the same thing because of its no accountability at local level. People didn't really understand what it was. […] They [teachers] are not accountable for it. They [students] won't be told whether they passed or failed, the teachers won't be told whether they passed or failed and then this data came out and you know press are telling us our education system's rubbish. And it's not. You know if you look at our national qualifications they are going up. [Central education official (1)*]"

It's hard to know where to start with this. The whole point of surveys like PISA and SSLN is that they are *not* national exams and are *not* an accountability mechanism.

They are a standardised test, on a robust sample, with no pass or fail. Every sensible system treats this as a useful data point.

And even if you think international comparisons are somehow invalid, PISA also shows how a country has changed in its own right, and how different types of pupil within a country perform. I'm personally less vexed by the country rankings, than the fact Scottish students today do worse than those 20 years ago. Or that the gap between the least and most deprived pupils in Scotland has got *bigger*. And as Lindsay Paterson points out, it is very plausible indeed that it's due to the Curriculum for Excellence.

This independence and ability to make a range of comparisons is what matters. Nobody serious thinks PISA is the only measure. But 'not valid' is a kind of denial.

And that's probably the most troubling thing here. PISA shows outcomes. Those outcomes are not just measurements of *schools* but of *school systems*, including lots of ineffable things about expectations and factors outside the classroom. Some interviewees make this point. It's a fair one. Culture matters.

But the irony is that saying 'PISA is invalid because of culture' is an amazingly acute expression of our own culture. It's one of complacency. It's one of looking inwards. It's one of buying our own spin.

One final quote sums up this situation:
So culturally you know the only people were using PISA at that kind of level are politicians. […] And nobody, nobody actually implementing it really cares.

Nobody really cares? Speak for yourself.

Gordon Hector is a policy consultant and former Director of Policy and Strategy for the Scottish Conservatives

Net Zero – Moving the Target - Stuart Paton

Originally posted 26 April 2024

The political impact of the Scottish Government's decision last week to drop its 2030 climate change target hit home yesterday with the SNP Government pre-emptively terminating their power sharing agreement with the Greens. However, the policy decision was almost inevitable. The trigger seemed to be the UK wide Climate Change Committee (CCC) stating that the level of reductions required were 'beyond what is credible' and there was "no comprehensive delivery strategy for meeting future emissions targets". The CCC also noted the publication of Scotland's new draft Climate Change Plan which was due late in 2023, had been "delayed" and that Scotland had missed its legally binding annual targets in 8 of the last 12 years.

Although Maire McAllan, the Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero and Just Transition, described the CCC report as being 'insightful' and that the government has an 'unwavering commitment' to ending our contribution to global emissions the dropping of the 2030 target is a damning indictment on the Scottish Government's approach to Net Zero.

Various informed commentators, including Professor Paul De Leuuw of Robert Gordon's University and Professor John Underhill of the University of Aberdeen, both stated that the decision was disappointing but inevitable. Professor De Leuuw stressed, as have Reform Scotland, that delivery of the goals "needs direction, a sense of urgency, accountability for delivery and transparency on progress, all underpinned by credible, coordinated and actionable transition plans'. Various groups, including Oxfam Scotland and Friends of the Earth Scotland (FoES) have condemned the decision, with FoES calling it the 'worst environmental decision in the history of the Scottish Parliament'. A view echoed by the Green Party.

In making the announcement, the Net Zero minister announced a set of new goals and targets. These included multi-year carbon budgets rather than annual targets, the publication of a new route map this year for the delivery of approximately 24,000 additional electric vehicle charge points by 2030, an integrated ticketing system that can be used across all public transport, a pilot scheme to support the roll out of methane suppressing food products to reduce emissions from livestock working, consulting on a new carbon tax on the largest estates to encourage peatland restoration, tree planting and renewable energy generation, helping people reduce their reliance on cars with a 20% fall in their use by 2030, the creation of a Just Transition plan for the Mossmorran industrial site developed in partnership with the operators of the plant, workforce and local community.

However, as Reform Scotland have pointed out previously, the issue is not about setting goals and targets, but actually having clearly defined plans to deliver. The Draft Strategy published last year referenced at least 18 visions and strategies creating a messy policy landscape that is both confusing and near impossible to track. The demand side read more like a wish list, as opposed to a route map detailing how

important goals are to be reached. The proposals made by the Net Zero minister on 18th April add more complexity to an already complicated set of visions and strategies. In the Reform Scotland response to the Government's call for comments on their energy strategy in May 2023, we proposed:

- Creating a public timeline indicating all of the government's targets and policies alongside the progress being made towards each of them. The announcement last week defined some specific aims but little detail on how to achieve these and there is still no overall picture of all the targets.
- An openness about the potential upfront costs that consumers and the public purse could face. This is the greatest risk to the entire Net Zero target- without clarity and honesty on the costs and hopefully longer term benefits there is an opening for populist politicians to completely undermine all of the efforts being made to achieve Net Zero.
- Public awareness campaign advising people how to make their homes fit for the 21st century, alongside clarity of when changes will be enforced. Such transparency would also offer clarity to industry.
- Exploring the opportunity to make other more immediate changes, within the remit of the Scottish Government, such as banning new gas boilers in new buildings or new gas cookers in homes. The announcement last week made no mention of home heating which accounts for 20% of Scotland's carbon emissions.
- Scrapping Vehicle Excise Duty and Fuel Duty and replacing them with a pay-as-you-drive form of road pricing. Making the necessary changes to car taxes would require action from the UK government as the powers are reserved. However, the UK Government also has legally binding commitments to cut emissions and working together on a policy such as road pricing offers an opportunity to improve outcomes for all.

Unfortunately, as highlighted by last week's announcement, we are falling far short of the 'world leading' aspirations of the Scottish Government on Net Zero. And there is no evidence, with or without the Scottish Greens, that the current administration will actually implement the challenging and far reaching policies required.

Stuart Paton is an energy industry advisor and former Chief Executive of Dana Petroleum. He is also an associate of Reform Scotland

Collaboration: the way forward for Scotland's councils - Gillian Hunt

Originally posted 15 May 2024

Scotland's local authorities do not have the capacity or capability to deliver the essential services our citizens need. That is a fact. No-one seems to disagree: we need to pull together and create partnerships to deliver services but is this happening across Scotland?

COSLA stated in their 2022-2027 Plan that "*Right now, we face a combination of social and financial challenges never seen in modern times*". So that people can "live well locally" COSLA's plan focuses on six key priority areas and to deliver these priorities they rely on COSLA Convention, Leaders and Boards, and significantly on partnerships. Partnerships which include Scottish Government, Public Health Scotland and the third, independent and private sectors.

The Improvement Service's 'Delivering a future for Scottish local authorities' highlights how local government can, "transition to a model of service delivery that builds on current success but more deliberately supports effective partnership to deliver outcomes needed in communities."

Looking back at the four pillars of the 2011 Christie Commission report: empowerment of individuals and communities, a requirement to work much more closely in partnership, the prevention of negative outcomes and the need to become more efficient were strong messages. And these principles of people, partnership, prevention and performance still hold true for the current and future delivery of services. The question is how far have we come in the 23 years since the report's publication? Not nearly far enough is the answer.

In these challenging times, collaboration with others is essential. In a previous paper, 'An Ecosystem: what we need for effective collaboration in Scotland', collaboration between the public third and private sectors was examined. Key ingredients for effective collaboration outlined were: knowing what it is you need to change or improve: finding others to help; strong and trusting relationships; and partners coming together as equals. Time and again successful collaboration proves that you get more: the whole is greater than its parts.

One local authority demonstrating the key principles of the Christie Report and doing so through effective collaboration is the City of Dundee. The report 'Collaboration in Dundee' (see below) highlights a small number of the array of collaborations Dundee's Children and Families Department has with public, third and private sector partners, which are having an impact on outcomes.

The following collaborations were spotlighted in the report:

1. Art at the Start – supports parents and carers, whist making art together, to practically learn about, notice and reflect upon how their young (two year old) children communicate and how beneficial it is when adults around children tune

into and respond positively to these communications. Relationships between parents/carers and practitioners are built and strengthened through Art at the Star

2. Domestic Abuse Capacity Building – builds confidence and competence of the workforce in understanding and responding to domestic abuse, whilst developing new services to provide additional support.
3. Community Mental Health and Wellbeing Fund for Children and Young People – to date 600 children and young people got the help they needed, when they needed it, and from the people with the right skills, knowledge and experience to provide it.
4. Together to Thrive – a collaboration between Mental Health Foundation (MHF), NHS Tayside Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS), Dundee City Council (via the Alliance) alongside 9 third-sector delivery organisations (Community-based Organisations, or CBOs) and school referral partners to use a task-sharing model which aims to deliver transformational change in how support is delivered to families.
5. Addressing Neglect and Enhancing Wellbeing – ANEW is an active implementation approach which allows key staff in schools, nurseries and health visiting teams to listen to, engage with and support children, young people and families more effectively.

Dundee is refreshingly open and honest about the challenges they face and in order to address these are outward-looking, actively seeking partners who can help. And when those collaborations are in place the council is not precious about who leads, it's about who is best to do so.

The benefits of the collaborative approach in Dundee are clear: opportunities to share resources and expertise; quick and efficient signposting and easy access to support; avoidance of duplication and creative collaborations. Possibly most importantly is the way they are able to promote and develop whole family approaches, and do this *with*, not *to* families.

The report concludes with lessons learned from the collaborations spotlighted and provides five recommendations for others looking to work in this way:

1. Be open and honest about what you need to do.
2. Listen to and work with children, young people, their families, and staff, to shape your services.
3. Seek collaborators and partners who can help.
4. Develop relationships and trust with partners, learn from each other and act as equals.

The final recommendation is: raise awareness-prototype-evaluate-propose-act. It's so important to first examine the problem and tell people about it. Devising a pilot or prototype then allows you to test out solutions, which can then be evaluated to prove impact. Once evaluated you are in a position to propose workable solutions and take the necessary action. Simple isn't it?

If the City of Dundee Council can operate in this way, then others can too. We must learn from effective practice if we are to be able to deliver the services our citizens want and need.

Gillian Hunt is an educational consultant and former teacher.

Gillian's full report, collaboration in Dundee, can be read here.

Improving the well-being and skills of young people in Scotland by strategic structural change

- Euan Mackie

Originally posted 30 May 2024

In a previous blog, I indicated how rigid institutional mindsets can hold back the educational well-being of many Scottish young people. I don't believe it is easy to change this, but in this blog, I suggest how Scottish Education might be improved.

I don't fault the willingness and skills of those who wish to support young people's growth. However, in my experience, as a headteacher and educational coach, I have seen how the system often fails the growth of individual agency of those who work and learn in it. This characteristic is something the OECD identifies as being important for health, well-being and future development. A lack of attention to agency and personal confidence renders many young people unable to contribute to society while deskilling their parents and teachers. It leads to many of the negative outcomes prevalent in schools (absenteeism, apathy and violence) and in Scottish society (disengagement, self-medication in drugs and alcohol, anti-social behaviour, suicide and chronic health issues).
I believe the prime function of educators is to nurture young people through safe pathways of personal growth with the warm oversight of adults. This foundation should provide a growth of individual agency – an ability to become self-confident to overcome setbacks and build well-being resilience. It's more than an academic orientated education (though structure is important), or a model which identifies many young people with special need characteristics. It is one of relentlessly focusing on the pastoral care of young people while building their competence and agency in life skills. Strategic structural reform is needed to accomplish this better.

A standing commission on educational reform might be the way to go, based on a cross-party political consensus to nurture citizenship through building personal agency, family importance and efficacy, and community empowerment – a Scandinavian model of building mature civic co-operation for community and personal responsibility. This may be a tall order for our current political discourse.

This orientation would mean repurposing the prime objective of all those who are engaged in the institutions of the Scottish Education sector. A national educational covenant could be an important and overriding lens for reform. Specifically to address:

- Improving the quality of the social and physical environments of pre-school children and their families: Encouraging the status and confidence of parents, and quality of their partnership with childcare providers for family efficacy; Improving the social experiences of young children (Beyond screen time and childcare); Preparation for maturity in concentration, self-care and mental, emotional and physical development ready for a later school experience; Creating positive community environments for families and their associated opportunities for nurture and play.
- Emphasising Primary School Literacy, Communication Skills & Expressive Social Experiences: Following from richer early nursery education foundations, young

children will benefit from a later start to primary education at the ages of 6 or 7, with more psychological and development maturity. This transition would then focus strongly on early organisation of pedagogical awareness in letter formation and phonics to provide a comprehensive stronger literacy foundation, allied with expressive and social activities in safe pleasant environments, with parents having clear ideas of their contributions.

- Early Secondary School Competencies and Socially Rich environments for 12-16-year-olds: Revitalising the early secondary school curriculum highlighting broadly based competencies through awards and socially rich experiences; Oversight by small teams of teachers who have cross subject teaching and pastoral responsibilities, with closer connection and ongoing dialogue with parents (a long awaited reform highlighted over 30 years ago); The conclusion of a general education should be one of broad and varied accomplishments and a strong sense of personal agency ready for the maturer post-16 phase.
- The alignment of status of vocational and academic post-16 educational experiences (including communication and life competencies) and broader opportunities for personal growth, particularly in skills, in comprehensive gymnasium institutions of different lines. The development of mentorship and coaching as a nurture for achievement and pastoral care through secondary into tertiary institutions of colleges and universities- providing a richer pastoral base for each young person.
- Alternative Routes for Education; The national and local authority recognition and nurture of alternative routes of education for many, particularly those with additional needs, interests and aptitudes. Targeted support for all kinds of organised alternative study e.g. arts, apprenticeships and skills, youth organisations, extra mural and evening classes, online learning and independent 'folk' high schools.

The covenant for educators, could be open to all stakeholders (from professionals through to parents and young people), to provide an overriding vision, dynamic and urgency to reduce bureaucratic mindsets and empire building. The covenant would highlight the prime responsibility of each individual for the pastoral care of young people, and the development of their skills and agency. The covenant sets out the energy to diminish elaborated schemes of institutional oversight and many administrative protocols.

Those who take up the covenant in leadership of government agencies (national and local authority) should set the strategy to provide greater agency and opportunity for all stakeholders through less top-down prescription and restrictive practices. The purpose of this approach is to nurture personal and professional agency not hindered by mentalities of tick box cultures, gatekeeping and of institutional rules and restrictions. The freedoms envisaged should greatly reduce workload, expense, while allowing more time to devote to local flexibility, and expanding opportunities for young people.

Those in senior positions could also have a covenant aspiration to act part time at the chalk face, in whatever capacity they can contribute, to rebuild trust in senior

educational leadership so that those who are out of the classroom emphasise their commitment to deliver well thought out reform.

Key to the actions of educators is the improvement of social environments of young people, focusing on young people's appreciation of feeling safe and secure and having adults who know them. Well-being can be nurtured through pastoral experiences of the expressive arts, as well as volunteering, to provide service to others in the school and community. Young people should then experience different kinds of relationships with adults and their extended social group, beyond the traditional teacher- pupil model. In this way, social skills are enhanced as individual uniqueness is respected, with reassurances that problems in life are natural, and can be worked through by building confidence and resilience. Such positive experiences could help provide young people with a stronger sense of personal meaning and purpose and counter-balance the influence and attraction of social media.

There may be a case to allow local authority and schools to personalise a wider range of competency awards for the 12-to-16-year age. These broader and richer set of awards could allow more locally tailored experiences of various kinds from academic stretching attainments to expressive and service accomplishments. Teachers who would have direct pastoral care for this age group would act as facilitators for relentlessly building these tailored opportunities for these young people. The rigour of current academic qualifications should be maintained but there should be more scope for innovation, flexibility and freedom in the classroom and less on time consuming evidence tracking.

In all these strategic and operational matters the Educational Covenant may then relentlessly focus that the system seeks to grow young people, their parents and their teachers with stronger senses of personal agency, and abilities to choose maturely good decisions for themselves and their community. This sets to align education with the natural inclinations and disposition of human nature, providing hope and opportunity, while recognising that nurture often trumps genetic presumptions or labelling.

Euan Mackie has wide experience of working with children in leadership roles from nursery education through to young people at primary, secondary and university level and has spent over ten years coaching and supporting school leaders. He is currently an Education adviser for the African JED Child Trust Foundation and the Alternatives to Violence Project.

Enhancing education through collaboration: A call for a unified approach

- **Jess Power**

Originally posted 21 June 2024

Deep down, every teacher (I hope) is driven by the same mission: to ignite a passion for learning in young minds and guide them towards success. Scottish education, with its rich history, has long aimed – though not always perfectly realised – to advance society by providing a robust educational foundation for all.

In today's digital age, this mission is more relevant than ever. The modern world demands fluency in technology, and Computing Science education is key to meeting this demand. By equipping pupils with essential problem-solving, logical thinking, and technical skills, Computing Science prepares them to navigate the complexities of the digital revolution and emerging AI era. However, a persistent shortage of qualified teachers often impedes access to this vital subject, particularly at Higher and Advanced Higher levels.

A potential solution is improved cooperation between independent and public schools. There is no need to reinvent the wheel; rather, public and independent schools should be actively sharing resources and expertise to meet the needs of all pupils. Prioritising cooperation over competition allows schools to create a more equitable and effective educational landscape.

I am privileged to be a part of one such collaboration as Head of RGC Online, the digital extension of Robert Gordon's College in partnering with state schools across Scotland. RGC Online emerged from our collective commitment to enhancing subject accessibility, particularly following a successful pivot to online learning during the pandemic. Our partnerships include organisations like ABZ Campus, a network of secondary schools in Aberdeen. With RGC Online, pupils have the opportunity to learn via live online lessons for Higher Computing Science, scheduled outside their regular school hours. This approach not only overcomes timetabling barriers but also ensures access to subjects that might otherwise be inaccessible. There are also plans underway to expand the subject offerings, with Higher Applications of Mathematics launching in 2024/2025, followed by additional subjects in the subsequent years.

The partnership has delivered great success such as the 100% AB pass rate attained by its inaugural 2022/2023 cohort. Many of those pupils have gone on to university programmes in computing and technology, opportunities they would not have had access to without achieving Higher Computing Science qualifications.

Such effective teaching collaborations ensure that pupils gain access to specialised subjects and benefit from the expertise of educators, reaching a wider audience than traditional local teaching might allow. In addition, teachers reap the rewards of valuable professional development opportunities fostered through collaborative efforts and the exchange of innovative pedagogical approaches.

Aberdeen's success story can serve as a blueprint for Scotland to build a sustainable cooperative framework that ensures all pupils have access to a diverse range of educational opportunities. An online delivery model, where passionate and experienced educators reach an audience, unbound by geography, not only addresses teacher shortages in critical subjects like Computing Science but also leverages a strength traditionally seen in the independent sector: the ability to offer a broad range of subjects. By utilising the transformative power of technology for digital instruction, this model can provide access to a wider range of subjects, ensuring that all young people have the opportunity to explore diverse areas of study and benefit from a rich, well-rounded education.

Other excellent examples of partnerships between independent and state schools across Scotland are making similar positive impacts. George Watson's College in Edinburgh has been supporting access to Mandarin language instruction across schools in the area. The Futures Institute at Dollar Academy (FIDA) provides an online learning platform rooted in the UN Sustainable Development Goals and offers pupils access to subjects such as Higher Politics which they might not be able to study in their own school.

By fostering a culture of collaboration and leveraging the power of technology in digital instruction, Scottish education can rise to meet the challenges of the digital age. It is through partnership and cooperation that we can ensure every pupil has the chance to achieve their full potential, building a more equitable and dynamic educational landscape where every young mind is equipped and inspired to shape the future.

Jess Power is Head of Robert Gordon College Online

The future of the UK's oil and gas industry - Gabriel Mynheer

Originally posted 1 July 2024

It is evident that the future of the UK's oil and gas industry has become a highly politicised issue and has come to the fore in this general election campaign.

The UK used to produce enough energy to be self-sufficient. Today, our oil and gas consumption is double that of domestic production, with more than 40% of our total energy consumption now imported. We are becoming increasingly reliant on energy imports to meet our everyday needs. If we don't continue to invest in indigenous oil and gas production then it is expected that we'll be forced to import more than 80% of our energy needs by 2030.

While the UK's renewable sector is gaining momentum, it's not accelerating fast enough. A lack of enabling policy, compounded by the UK's permitting and approval process, is hindering progress. Meanwhile, transitioning oil and gas too quickly from the economy without sufficient new energy replacement could expose the UK to all sorts of major issues. Gas backup is crucial for the reliability of intermittent renewables such as wind and solar. Fundamentally, without a healthy UK gas sector, the future of renewables will be jeopardised. So, import more gas?

The intensity of emissions associated with domestic gas production is on average 7.5 times lower than that associated with liquified natural gas (LNG) imports, while the carbon footprint of homegrown oil production is around three times lower than imported barrels. In essence, we would end up importing more carbon-intensive volumes from countries with much weaker governance. While the UK could proudly say that it is reducing emissions associated with its own production, our contributions towards Global emissions will increase considerably!

Increased energy imports will also increase the risk of power outages which, in a worst case scenario, could lead the Government to revert to coal as a back-up. This is not an impossibility given the possible shutdown of the Rough Storage Field off the east coast of England, which accounts for 50% of our storage capacity. What is not widely communicated is just how little our gas storage capacity is. At just 12 days, UK gas storage is considerably lower than the European storage average of 98 days making us much more sensitive to gas market conditions during peak winter demand periods. Not fixing our gas storage system exposes us to LNG purchasing trends from Europe, China and India.

What is evident is that whichever party is in government, it needs to prioritise the development and enactment of a coherent energy policy and supportive tax framework. Such measures should incentivise investment while enhancing energy resilience. The plan needs to recognise that all energy sources play an important role but acknowledge that ambitions and how the sector is constituted will change over time. It needs to facilitate an effective energy transition aimed at meeting net zero targets, but not at the expense of energy security.

How can this be achieved? The UK has an abundance of energy sector opportunities waiting to be unlocked. But unless there is a stable fiscal mechanism in place to incentivise companies to exploit these, we will continue on the economical self-destruction path that we have begun.

Currently, the UK's oil and gas tax system is considered one of the most unstable fiscal systems in the world, having experienced four changes in the last two years alone. In 2021, the oil and gas sector was taxed at a rate of 40%. Following a dramatic increase to energy prices the Government implemented a windfall tax which saw the overall tax rate increase to 75%. Ironically, when prices fell to record lows during the Covid period, and companies struggled to cover their overheads, governmental support was nowhere to be seen. Yet, without complaint, the sector continued to produce the barrels and molecules that the UK so desperately needs.

The Labour Party intends to increase taxation on the sector to a rate of 78%, naively claiming that this would align the UK with Norway. But the fiscal mechanisms could not be more different. The current UK fiscal mechanism is much harsher on a full-cycle basis than Norway's, as it lacks the carefully constructed investment allowances designed to encourage exploration and development activities.

A fiscal mechanism that boasts a high tax rate and disincentivises new investment will accelerate production declines which will ultimately accelerate the economic need to abandon maturing fields. Lower production means lower net tax receipts for the Government, meanwhile accelerated field abandonment results in large payments made to the oil and gas companies by the taxpayer. This means there are considerably less revenues available to the Government, thereby actually costing the country more. Naturally, lower investment levels would also negatively impact employment levels. There are 200,000 people in the UK working both directly and indirectly in its offshore sector. But 95,000 energy jobs will be at risk if investment does not increase significantly.

If ministers were to incentivise investment in the sector then the benefits are huge. A recent Wood Mackenzie study suggests that developing Rosebank and Cambo alone would generate gross value additions of more than $40bn dollars, including $4bn in its peak year. That equates to about 2% of Scotland's GDP. It will reduce our emissions and will also enable employment for 1,000 people per year for 30-plus years.

Concerningly, the results of a recent survey by the trade body Offshore Energies UK showed that most UK operators are now looking to reduce their investments in its oil and gas sector over the coming years, because of diminishing investment returns, increased taxation, greater political risk and overall basin declines.

Such sentiment may also impact the renewables sector. Jon Fitzpatrick of Gneiss Energy said "Energy supermajors have all but exited the North Sea basin and my concern is that this dwindling confidence will affect offshore wind investors – many of whom are exactly the same energy majors – too". He added "investors want certainty, or at least confidence in a stable regulatory and fiscal regime. Confidence that their projects will receive a Contract for Difference at a reasonable price (and that allows for

home-grown content), certainty that future grid charges will be stable and certainty that offshore wind schemes will not become cash cows in the years ahead".

Regardless of ones political preferences, we find ourselves at a critical juncture where some urgent decisions need to made. Government needs to understand that the UK's energy transition will not happen unless we invest in oil and gas production today. We can have a green agenda but still produce hydrocarbons. Government needs to be pragmatic and work with the experts to implement a sensible policy to deliver the UK's twin targets of energy security and decarbonisation.

Gabriel Mynheer is President of the Scottish Energy Forum. The Scottish Energy Forum, is an impartial organisiation that seeks to promote better communication and understanding between industry and policymakers across the entire energy spectrum, so as to contribute to a better informed UK Energy Strategy.

Social Bridging Finance
- Kenneth Ferguson

Originally posted 2 July 2024

The Christie Commission's roadmap for public service reform published back in 2011 continues to challenge public service providers. Public Services have faced the dual challenge of finding ways to sustain funding for existing service delivery while simultaneously testing and moving to new ways of preventative working. As a result, the need for financial models which support this shift in delivery and funding has grown significantly. Various models have been developed to help support this move to preventative delivery with varying degrees of success.

In England and Wales, commissioners have increasingly used payment-by-results models (such as Social Impact Bonds and Outcomes Contracts). However the operational criticisms of them are well rehearsed and include a significant amount of contractual set up and monitoring, a need to find the funds for repayment plus interest, and a lack of clarity around how the work will actually be sustained after the Bond is paid back.

In Scotland the political landscape is different, where there is an often repeated ideological opposition to SIBs on the grounds of "profiting from suffering". However, it also true that the charity and social enterprise sector is suffering. In our recent report at the Centre for Social Justice (CSJ) into the state of small charities, entitled "Underfunded and Overlooked", we found that the funding and power imbalances within the charity sector leave smaller charities without consistent access to public and private funding that would enable them to turbo-charge their impact. So, while in Scotland any model adopted has by necessity had to take cognisance of the operational and ideological hurdles, we urgently need new and better funding models if we are to sustain our charitable infrastructure. Indeed, this would prove popular with the public. Polling for the CSJ revealed 79 per cent of UK adults agree that small, local, charities seem to be often overlooked and under resourced.

During the period 2010 -2018 Public Social Partnerships (PSPs) were the favoured model in Scotland. The model had no additional funding and relied on the Public Body to work in partnership with the Third Sector to generate new ways of working. However, they singularly failed to be sustained or scaled.

Back in 2016 The Robertson Trust, as Scotland's largest independent funder, was keen to find a way to drive partnership between Third Sector, Government and Philanthropy to make changes to social policy. It developed a hybrid model using the best of the SIB and PSP approach. It called this new model Social Bridging Finance (SBF).

While Social Bridging Finance (SBF) shares certain principles with existing models, it differs in some key respects. The SBF model intentionally involves third sector delivery partners earlier and more deeply in the commissioning of services and works on the expectation that those services which evidence their success will be sustained, with no requirement for payback to the investor as the trial funding comes from

philanthropy. The model also requires the inclusion of a contractual commitment from the public sector to sustain services ONLY IF the charity achieves the pre-agreed outcomes during the initial trial phase.

Social Bridging Finance is therefore a straight-forward model which enables grant funding from independent funding sources to support the initial demonstration phase of an evidence-based service, whilst also ensuring that the public sector only sustains those services which successfully meet agreed outcomes.

HOW DOES IT WORK?

1. DESIGN A working group is formed between a public sector body, a third sector organisation and an independent funder to replicate an existing evidence-based service model which has been trialled successfully elsewhere, or at a small-scale in the existing geography. The service should enable a move from reactive to preventative services and meet an identified need which the public sector body is prepared to fund longer term. Very importantly the partners need to agree the success criteria in advance.
2. CONTRACT A binding contract is signed between the partners to commit the public sector organisation to sustaining funding for the service for a specified period of time, if the agreed success criteria are met. This pro forma contract is just 12 pages, that of a SIB can run to several hundred pages!
3. DEMONSTRATION After an allowance for an initial set-up phase the service is delivered for an agreed period of time, usually 2 years. During this trial stage, which is grant funded (this can be from a range of sources, including Trusts and Foundations, public sector, and individual philanthropists), partners can adjust how the interventions are delivered, in order to ensure the best chance of meeting the agreed success criteria. A Project Board is established with senior representatives from all the partners to ensure strategic level oversight of progress.
4. EVALUATION An "audit" is commissioned by the partnership and paid for by the independent funder at the outset of the trial period. This "audit" will make an informed judgement as to whether or not the agreed success criteria have been met at the end of the trial. It is not an evaluation of the service.
5. SUSTAINABILITY If the external "auditor" determines that the agreed success criteria have been met, then the contract determines the length of time for which the public sector organisation will sustain the service. If the trial period has not been successful, all partners ensure that they take learning from the process and walk away, thus the public sector commissioner faces no risk from the trial as this is carried in full by the grant funder.

HOW HAS IT WORKED?

To date, the model has been used six times. In all but one case the model has worked extremely well with the independent evaluation stating: "*the emerging evidence suggests the SBF model has potential to enhance the long-term sustainability of preventative services delivered by the third sector.*"

Case Study: MCR Pathways

From 2010, over a period of five years, the charity MCR Pathways developed a mentoring programme in six schools in the north east of Glasgow. The programme worked in school with young people in the care system and provided a carefully

matched adult volunteer who met with them once a week. The impact of this "one good adult" was highly significant and transformed the educational attainment of the young people. MCR approached a consortium of funders highlighting a close working relationship with Glasgow City Council. The Council wanted to roll the model out further but didn't have the finance to do an extended trial.

The funders together funded £1M a three year no risk trial to help MCR move from 6 to 12 schools in Glasgow. Using the Social Bridging Model, the funders were able to get Glasgow City Council to sign a contract which said that if MCR delivered the desired educational outcomes in the 12 schools by the end of three years, GCC would then roll the model to all of its 29 schools and sustain the funding for a further five years.

Eighteen months into the trial period, Maureen McKenna the Executive Director of Education at GCC, asked that the trial be stopped, not because it wasn't working but because the model was working so well she felt it would remiss of her not to roll to the other schools. She also agreed that she would not sustain for just five years but would change her systems and embed the model as business as usual for educational provision in Glasgow.

She said of the model, "*The Social Bridging Finance model has worked exceptionally well for us in Glasgow. We wanted to transform the way we provided support for young people. We needed support to move from where we were to where we wanted to be. This model has allowed us to create a new approach which is now business as usual*".

Not only has MCR now expanded out to 29 schools in Glasgow, the then Education Secretary at the Scottish Government, John Swinney, took the model and funded an £18M roll out currently underway with MCR across 200 schools in Scotland.

From those involved in the other trials, the feedback has been equally positive. For example, Kate Rocks, when Head of Children's Services and Criminal Justice at East Renfrewshire Council said of the model "*It allows you permission to be brave and to test what is required … it gives you freedom."* Paul Clancy when Executive Director of Children and Family Services at Dundee City Council said *"It's changed our approach and the intensity of the work we're involved in. It bridges you to a new place…"*

CONCLUSION

Social Bridging Finance is not a silver bullet for changing public services, but by using philanthropic money it can help de-risk change for the public sector in its move to preventative services. The model plays to each of the three partners strengths; the public body can scale and sustain, the charity can deliver impactful flexible services, and the funder can provide the initial risk capital to make it all happen. All delivered with a partnership approach, surely something that is sadly lacking in many of our public services at present!

Kenneth Ferguson is Head of Scotland at the Centre for Social Justice Foundation

Reforming Scotland's Justice System
- Hamish Robertson

Originally posted 31 July 2024

Scotland's prison population has hit 'unprecedented' levels. That's not my word, but the word used by the Scottish Government when it announced that it would be releasing hundreds of prisoners early as part of an emergency response to overcrowding.

It isn't always an easy topic to discuss, but if ever there was a time to speak about the need to reform Scotland's justice system, it is now.

England, too, is facing huge pressure in the justice system with the new Labour administration appointing James Timpson as prisons minister, a sign of how seriously this is being taken.

Scotland's prison population currently sits at around 8,000. The early release of some prisoners has already started in a bid to alleviate pressure on the system. But while this will, of course, help in the short-term, it will do little to solve the larger issues.

Instead of continually seeking out short-term solutions, what we need to do is build a justice system for the future that prevents such problems arising again, at the same time as we fund and deal with the present issue.

This won't be easy, but it is necessary.

It begins with recognising that the justice system does not stand on its own. We can't just look to address the challenges within it, without realising the impact of other policy areas, including housing, health and education.

At the Wise Group we don't just work in justice. We support families across Scotland with the cost-of-living crisis, energy bills and housing.

This allows us to tailor our New Routes programme to fit the needs of those we support.

Every person who works with us is different. The reasons they went to prison in the first place are individual to them, as are the needs they have when they come out.

Our wider justice system should reflect this. Leaving prison isn't the end of someone's punishment, the consequences of serving a custodial sentence are wide-ranging.

Difficulties can be found in rejoining families, finding housing and trying to re-enter the employment market.

Therefore, one of the best things we can provide is stability. Our relational mentors work with individuals to help them reintegrate into society – but providing a stable presence is sometimes the most important thing we can do.

And it's something our wider justice system should look to do.

One of the most challenging parts of reform will be selling such ideas to the public.

While making changes, we must show people the benefits of a justice system that works for everyone – not just those involved with it. No one wants to be a victim of crime, and the way to ensure that is to cut offending. To do that, we can cut reoffending, but we can also look to stop people carrying out the initial offence too.

This means addressing those areas I spoke about – housing, education and health care. As I said, none of this is easy and it will take a lot of work. But we no longer have a choice. And the time is now.

Hamish Robertson is Strategic Development Lead at The Wise Group. Hamish was also one of the panellists at our recent event – *Crowded Cells, Empty Futures: Why we must tackle Scotland's growing prison population.*

Cross party solution needed to fix Higher Education funding problems

- Elizabeth Smith MSP

Originally posted 5 August 2024

In 1978, when I started my degree in Economics at Edinburgh University, I recall my director of studies telling me that it was a privilege to be one of every ten young people who would be able to study at a higher education institution and, once he elaborated on the academic and social responsibilities which came with that privilege, he checked that I knew the matriculation procedures.

A few days later, matriculation documents in hand, I queued in Adam House in Edinburgh's Chamber Street, to ensure that my name had been entered for the university student grant award. Soon, I had the necessary paperwork to allow me to access free higher education, much to my parents' pleasure.

Of course it wasn't free at all. The state was paying.

Those were the days when there were far fewer universities and far fewer undergraduates so the cost of higher education was not remotely equivalent to what it is today.

Now, the statistics about funding gaps are stark – so stark that the status quo just will not cut it. As Reform Scotland and many other academics and commentators have told us – and, to their credit, for quite some time – policies at both Westminster and Holyrood are having detrimental impacts on the likes of class teaching resources, on course availability and on research capability. Recent findings from the Institute of Fiscal Studies showed that funding for student per year of study has fallen by 19% in real terms since academic session 2013-14.

Yet despite all this, higher education funding has become a political football being kicked around for electoral reasons rather than for what is in the best interest of education. Far too many politicians have had their heads firmly in the sand for far too long, just hoping that the problem will go away.

Well, it won't.

Which is why, throughout my time in Holyrood, I have consistently called for a cross-party, open and frank debate about the future of higher education funding. I want to see serious, cross party moves to arrive at a sustainable solution to address the concerns of our university principals who are, quite rightly, beside themselves with anxiety about what the future might hold for their own institutions. It is fair to say that for quite a bit of my 18 years as an MSP, I have been struggling against the prevailing wind (which has included some in my own party) but, now, as Alex Salmond' rocks are well and truly melting in the sun, things are changing.

Indeed, I firmly believe my calls are gaining support across the party divide because no-one, of whatever political colour, can now argue that the current system is working.

As we all know, university education provides a shared benefit. There is a benefit to the individual undertaking a university course through the increased earning opportunities as well as those which provide intellectual enhancement, and there is the obvious benefit to the state from an economic perspective, most especially in terms of ensuring we have a highly skilled workforce. As such, it is perfectly reasonable to expect some sharing of the cost.

The key question then is what is the right balance which neither places a huge debt burden on students nor expects the taxpayer to come up with all the funds which they can increasingly ill afford. That should be the basis for the debate and, in coming to a conclusion, we should always be mindful of the question "what is education for?". As we answer that we will not arrive at the current funding arrangements.

Most university principals across the land believe that politicians are letting them down.

If it means an independent commission as some principals have suggested then that is what must happen and yes, that should also include addressing the student visa issue which, in my opinion, was badly mishandled by the previous Westminster Government. Our universities are some of the finest higher education institutions in the world, renowned for their teaching and their research, for being able to attract the brightest and the best, and for the rich contributions they make to Scottish society. They will not stay that way unless politicians remove their heads from the sand and come together to sort this. It is too important to get it wrong.

Elizabeth Smith CBE is a Conservative MSP for Mid Scotland and Fife and Shadow Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government

Taxing times for the UK Oil and Gas Industry - Stuart Paton

Originally posted 15 August 2024

The last couple of weeks have seen furore from the UK oil and gas industry following the Chancellor's statement on Monday 29th July which included an increase in offshore oil and gas taxes. This has included heated statements from David Whitehouse, CEO of the industry body Offshore Energy UK, and David Latin, Chair of Serica Energy, a UK focussed oil and gas company. The industry response does appear to have encouraged the government to engage further with the Treasury Minister James Murray visiting Aberdeen on Monday.

You may think the industry reaction is the standard response to increasing taxes from the government. You may also think that this is 'big oil' and hence they deserve to have 'windfall taxes' imposed on them. Indeed, last week Shell announced profits of £4.9 billion for the first quarter (yes, the first quarter) of the year.

However, the debate is a lot more nuanced than the headlines and hence it is worth drilling down (pun intended) to the next level of detail.

The headlines are that the UK Government, which has governance of all oil and gas production in UK water, is increasing the Energy Profit Level from 35% to 38% and extending the tenure to 2030. The EPL was originally implemented by the Conservative government in July 2022, for a limited time, as a 'windfall tax' on the oil companies. The EPL is in addition to the upstream (ie offshore oil and gas revenues) Corporation Tax rate of 30% plus a Supplementary Charge of 10% giving a new total tax rate of 78% compared with the standard UK corporation tax rate of 25%. Upstream taxes are 'ringfenced' to the offshore operations and hence profits cannot be offset against expenses in other parts of the company's business (for example construction of windfarms). The increase in the EPL will take the overall tax rate to the same as Norway which is a comparison the government often makes. What worries the industry more than the headline rate of tax however is the proposed, but not fully clarified, changes to capital allowances. Capital allowances are a standard mechanism across all industries in most countries whereby companies offset investment costs against profits. The Labour manifesto described changes to capital allowances as 'closing loopholes in the windfall tax' and the Green Party and others describe the allowances as 'subsidies'. However, the ability to claim costs, whether operational or capital, is a fundamental principle of the tax regime and is absolutely not a 'subsidy'.

To be clear up front, these UK tax changes will have minimal effect on the likes of Shell and BP as the vast bulk of their earnings come from international operations. The hardest hit will be a number of small to mid-size, UK focussed companies. These companies, including Harbour (the largest UK producer), Serica, Ithaca, NEO Energy and Enquest, are not household names but are the ones at the forefront of the UK oil and gas industry as the majors withdraw from the North Sea or focus on a few key fields. Just last week Shell and ExxonMobil announced the sale of their remaining fields in the Southern North Sea and Netherlands to Viaro. This leaves ExxonMobil with no

presence in the UK offshore. Likewise Chevron are looking to exit the area. Although the other supermajors, BP, Shell and Total, retain production in the North Sea, their portfolios are very focussed, a long way from their dominant positions in the past and almost insignificant in terms of their overall business. The recent sale of fields continues the trend of the last 25 years of oil and gas fields being transferred to smaller, more dynamic companies entirely focussed on the UK. Changes to the tax regime disproportionality affect them.

The announcement has two direct impacts. Firstly, the increase in tax and reduction in capital allowances makes any investment, be that a new field development or additional drilling or upgrades in an existing field, less economic. Secondly, the lack of clarity on capital allowances leads to uncertainty which inevitably means that projects will be delayed. These effects will mean that there will be less investment in UK offshore, leading to lower production and lower tax revenues- the opposite effect of the government's aims. This will inevitably lead to an acceleration in decommissioning of existing fields as incremental investment will not happen and new fields will not be tied back to existing platforms. Accelerated decommissioning will result in steeper decline in oil production and increased government costs to cover the tax allowances companies can still claim. Taken together, these effects will likely reduce the Government's tax take- the opposite of what they are hoping to achieve. Although green groups may applaud the speedier demise of North Sea oil and gas production, the stark fact is that this will be replaced by oil and gas from elsewhere rather than by greener alternatives.

There will also be a huge impact on the number of people employed in the industry- currently 200,000 people in the UK with some 70,000 in Scotland. Of course, the government asserts that these people will be able to transition to renewable energy. While there are undoubtably synergies between the two sectors, and many companies invest in both, the rate of decline in the oil and gas sector caused by these tax changes means it is very unlikely that the 'just transition' touted by government will come to pass. Indeed, a rapid decline in the oil and gas sector could irreparably damage the supply chain with a direct impact on the renewables sector.

The oil and gas industry has made an additional claim regarding security of supply and carbon emissions. Oil and gas currently provides 74% of current UK total energy consumption, less than half of which is supplied from the North Sea. Even on a NetZero scenario, oil and gas will still account for 25% of UK total energy consumption by 2050. The industry argues that increased North Sea production will lead to improved security of supply. This effect is only marginal for oil, 80% of which is exported, due to the capacity of UK refineries. A stronger case can be made for gas, most of which is used in the UK, and this situation would strengthen if the UK had more gas storage capacity. The reopening of Rough gas storage in 2022 and planned expansion of the facility will help in this regard. As both oil and, to an increasing extent, gas are commodities priced on an international market, increasing UK supply will not reduce costs for UK consumers.

In terms of carbon emissions, I have previously written about the misleading information from former Conservative ministers and various industry bodies. Firstly,

the vast bulk of carbon emissions from oil and gas are related to burning the fuel not from the production, transportation and processing of the fuel. Secondly, carbon emissions from imported Norwegian and other imported piped gas (which accounts for about 40% of our gas consumption) has equivalent carbon emissions to domestically produced gas. Imported LNG does have significantly higher carbon emissions related to transportation which would be reduced with increased domestic production. Finally, new fields generally have lower carbon emissions related to production. Therefore, there is some positive, albeit minimal, impact in having domestically produced oil and gas from new fields.

I can imagine many people, outside the industry and north east of Scotland, applauding the proposed tax changes given the likely impact of reducing domestic oil and gas production. There are people who think we can instantly turn off our need for oil and gas and rely solely on renewable energy. However, this is naïve in the extreme. Scotland does generate most of its electricity from low carbon sources, including nuclear, but electricity only provides 22% of the country's energy needs. Transport, domestic heating, public heating, industry, the chemical industry all still reply on oil and gas and will do for many years. The current choice is not between fossil fuels and renewable electricity but between domestic oil and gas supply and an increasing proportion of international supply.

Stuart Paton is an energy industry advisor and former Chief Executive of Dana Petroleum. He is also an associate of Reform Scotland

Where Have All the Children Gone?
- Kenneth Ferguson

Originally posted 3 September 2024

More than four years since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the impacts of lockdown continue to severely affect children's education in Scotland. Despite the passage of time, the Scottish Government has not fully addressed the scale of this crisis or implemented a comprehensive response, particularly in managing rising school absenteeism which has reached alarming levels.

When schools in Scotland reopened after lockdowns, there was an expectation that students would return eager to learn and socialize. However, this has not been the case. According to limited data from the Scottish Government, nearly one in three children are persistently absent i.e. regularly missing at least 10% of school. The Centre for Social Justice (CSJ) in their recent report entitled "*Where Have All The Children Gone?*" found a 72% increase in the number of children missing 50% or more of school time compared to pre-pandemic levels. These students, who are more frequently absent than present, represent a significant concern. These figures confirmed the Reform Scotland report in October 2023 entitled "*Absent Minds*".

What is particularly troubling is the lack of comprehensive data collection by the Scottish Government, which means the full extent of this crisis is unknown. Both The CSJ and Reform Scotland had to rely on Freedom of Information (FOI) requests to obtain data from local authorities because there is no centralised, complete, up-to-date absence data in Scotland. While the entire UK struggles with this issue, Scotland is notably behind England, where more detailed and regular data on school attendance is published termly.

Key Findings and Recommendations

The CSJ's report highlights several key findings and provides recommendations for addressing the crisis. The report's data backs that from Reform Scotland that showed in the 2022/23 academic year, 32% of Scottish children were persistently absent, missing 10% or more of their school time. In comparison, the figure in England was 21%, indicating that Scotland's problem is even more severe.

The report also shows a 72% increase in severe absence rates (children missing 50% or more of their school time) between the 2018/19 and 2022/23 academic years. These "ghost children" are not only out of school but also out of sight of the Scottish Government, which has not collected data on severe absences. This is in stark contrast to England, where data on both persistent and severe absences are collected and published regularly.

The failure to track detailed patterns of school absence and understand the characteristics of affected pupils hampers efforts to address the crisis. The CSJ argues that the Scottish Government must urgently improve its data collection and reporting on school absence. Regular, comprehensive data should be published termly and

should include breakdowns by pupil characteristics such as school type, additional support needs status, free school meals eligibility, gender, ethnicity, and deprivation levels.

A Plan for Change

The CSJ outlines a plan for reform to re-engage persistently and severely absent children. The plan focuses on improving data collection, rolling out attendance mentors, and rebuilding relationships between parents and schools.

Improving School Attendance Data:

- Education Scotland should publish termly data on school attendance, including persistent and severe absences.
- Data should be broken down by pupil characteristics and, where possible, backdated to allow for pre-pandemic comparisons.
- This would align Scotland more closely with England and provide a baseline for understanding absence rates across the UK.

Attendance Mentors:

- The Scottish Government should implement a national program of 200 attendance mentors.
- These mentors would work with families to address the underlying barriers to school attendance.
- The program is estimated to cost £8 million per year.

Rebuilding Parent-School Relationships:

- A National Parental Participation Strategy should be developed, requiring schools to focus on parental participation.
- Schools should create and publish parental participation plans in consultation with parents, tailored to local needs.
- Guidance on best practices for engaging parents of severely absent children should be provided.

Urgent Action Needed

The CSJ in its report emphasises the urgency of implementing these reforms. Without immediate action, the crisis will continue to worsen, with far-reaching consequences for children, their families, and society. The Scottish Government must take responsibility for addressing this crisis, starting with improved data collection and reporting. This will provide the foundation for understanding and tackling the problem, ultimately helping to bring these children back into view and back into school.

The legacy of the COVID-19 pandemic on education is profound and enduring. The Scottish Government's slow response to the school absence crisis is placing a generation of children at risk of long-term harm. The time to act is now, before this crisis becomes an irreversible catastrophe.

Kenneth Ferguson is Head of Scotland at the CSJ Foundation

We need to make Fatal Accident Inquiries far more effective

- Gillian Mawdsley

Originally posted 9 September 2024

The recent headlines of '£200 m spent on public inquiries' called for the Scottish Government to examine the effectiveness of public inquiries against the current background of fiscal austerity. It argued that the public required assurance that the operation of the public inquiry system is effective as to its desired outcomes and provides value for money spent.

This article examines the effectiveness of Fatal Accident Inquiries (FAI). They are a unique type of public inquiry, specific to Scotland. In outlining what the role of FAIs is within society, it is apparent that the public do not fully understand their context. Their expectations, such as they are, are not capable of being met. The financial costs of FAIs remain largely unaccounted, so assessment of their value for money cannot follow. Inherent weaknesses relating to the FAI system are discussed where little governance exists regarding the timescales in which FAIs are held and there is an absence of evaluation of any recommendations issued following the FAI's conclusion.

Undertaking a review on how the FAI system works would highlight issues and identify potential changes, where not all would necessarily be complex to introduce.

What are FAIs?

FAIs' structure is set out under the Inquiries into Fatal Accidents and Sudden Deaths etc. (Scotland) Act 2016 (2016 Act). FAIs are tasked with investigating the circumstances of a death(s) that occurred in Scotland. The Lord Advocate, as head of the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service (COPFS), instructs the holding of a mandatory or discretionary FAI, depending on the nature of the death. The best known FAIs are probably Lockerbie (Pan-Am terrorist bombing) and Dunblane (shooting at a primary school). Remember that FAIs are not an inquest under the coronial (English) system nor a public inquiry instructed by Ministers such as Piper Alpha disaster (North sea oilrig fire). Similarities do exist with the inquiry investigation process in that all require lessons to be learnt for the future.

FAIs are more limited in scope where at their conclusion, a sheriff must issue a determination under section 26 of the 2016 Act that is published. That outlines when and where the death occurred, its cause, any precautions, defects in the system of working and any facts relevant to the circumstances of the death. It may make recommendations too. Any determination is not admissible in evidence in other judicial proceedings nor under section 1(6) of the 2016 Act can a finding of civil or criminal liability be made.

Bereaved families tend not to understand the FAI's important remit, due possibly to an absence of publicly available information. No one plans for their family to become involved in a FAI and require to deal with death formalities when still grieving. The

availability of independent comprehensive information clarifying the purpose of FAIs would help.

The Scottish Government would appear as the best place to provide such information since they are responsible for ensuring and funding the Scottish death investigation process and are accountable for custody death investigations falling under Article 2 of the European Convention of Human Rights – the right to life.

The Coronial system may provide an example to follow as they have a Fact sheet on the operation of the inquest system available on the Government website.

The public need to know what to expect before any evaluation of the effectiveness of the FAI system can be commenced.

What do FAIs cost?
Discussing what public inquires cost in Scotland is apposite. However, information as to FAI costs cannot be ascertained as the services are provided by several organisations. These costs comprise those incurred by the Scottish Courts and Tribunals Service (SCTS), COPFS, and Scottish Legal Aid Board (SLAB). In most FAIs, police costs and Scottish Prison Service (deaths in custody) also need to be added. Such costs can be categorised as follows:

- Police investigating/reporting the deaths
- COPFS investigating/instructing/undertaking the FAI incurring relevant administrative and fiscal service staff costs.
- SCTS hosting the FAI in a court with staff costs including the sheriff's salary under the judicial budget.
- Witnesses giving evidence including the NHS regarding doctors certifying the cause of death and other appropriate experts.
- On occasion, bereaved family members may be eligible for legal aid under SLAB.

These costs are not currently clearly separated under the relevant organisations' budgets. Measuring value for money cannot therefore be undertaken. Each organisation should identify the relevant annual costs spent on FAIs. Measuring that annual spend should then be calculated against the number of FAIs that are held. Problems exist there too as to accuracy regarding the number of FAIs held annually.
COPFS estimate about 50-60 FAIs are held a year. This is not borne out by either the number of determinations published on the SCTS website nor the annual Report required for the Scottish Parliament under section 27 of the 2016 Act. Neither figures add up to as many as 50/60. Such information is also limited as knowing the number of FAIs held does not confirm how many days of court time were spent. Some FAIs are lengthy such as the FAI into the death of Sharman Weir (medical death) taking 46 court days. Others such as an FAI into a natural death in custody where no concerns were expressed over care may conclude quickly as evidence is substantially concluded by joint minute not requiring court time or witnesses attending.

Better provision of relevant statistical and financial information would allow a clear quantification of costs which would allow an effective annual comparison of the FAI costs to be evaluated.

Why hold a FAI?
FAIs are inevitably intrusive into private life but are deemed necessary in societal interests to examine the circumstances of a death to allow lessons to be learnt. A FAI into deaths resulting from a fire in a bonded warehouse at James Watt Street, Glasgow showed how barriers on the windows had prevented the rescue of the trapped workers. That resulted in improvement of building standards when adapting buildings from use as bonded warehouses. Similarly, the Ibrox disaster resulted in safety at sports stadiums being improved.

Delays have beset FAIs for years with no public timeline existing to ensure that they are held in a timely manner for lessons to be learnt. Recent inquiries into the deaths in the M9 crash and the death of Warren George Fenty (in prison concluding 10 years after his death) highlight the ongoing weaknesses of the system. Timelines in holding a FAI can be broken down as follows:

- From the date of the death until all death inquiries are completed and the FAI notice issued.
- From the date of the FAI notice initiating the court process until the evidence is concluded.
- From that date until the determination is issued by the judge.

Determinations themselves do not require to set out what the timescales were though delays may occasionally be referenced. Delays are therefore not effectively challenged as none of these periods outlined above must be completed within statutory timescales. That absence undermines the FAI system where determinations may be published many years after the date of death. Lessons to be learnt are delayed or worse, changes that were required have been made, rendering the FAI largely ineffectual. That absence of scrutiny on timescales lacks transparency as well as accountability as to responsibility for the delay.

In England, any death where the inquest is held over a year after the death requires a report, justifying the delay to the Chief Coroner. Introduction of a similar system in Scotland would allow for greater scrutiny demonstrating where and why delays occur and how best to address these issues. On occasion delay may be justified in complex cases.

FAI determination
The FAI may make recommendations which need to be meaningful and addressed to a party with whom responsibility for making change lies. Since the 2016 Act does not require anyone to respond to any recommendations that are made or require subsequent judicial scrutiny, any recommendations are not enforceable and consequently, ineffective.

With the coronial system, the coroner may issue a Prevention of Future Death Report, published on the website forming a record of the recommendation(s). There is a requirement that the organisation to whom such recommendation(s) was made must respond within a set timescale. That appears a more robust system, but it does not ensure changes result.

There is a somewhat parochial approach to death investigations. Surely greater opportunity could be seized to ensure an effective exchange of information between the coronial service and COPFS/Scottish Government over deaths. Since similar circumstances arise regarding deaths in England and Scotland, sharing the results of the inquest/inquiry might be appropriate. With heightened awareness of climate change, the inquest into Ella Kissi Debrah's death which highlighted the effects of air pollution and asthma provided an example of circumstances of a death that could support appropriate learning too for Scotland.

Improving the quality of the recommendations and a requirement for organisations to respond with the introduction of judicial scrutiny would enhance the FAI effectiveness. Sharing of information from deaths irrespective of their location would benefit society going forward.

Conclusion

With the absence of what seems relevant information, the effectiveness of FAIs as a subset of public inquires cannot be examined. Evidence appears to exist outlining that they are not as effective as they should or that their effectiveness could be improved. FAI provide opportunities to change and identify practices that can be improved from tragic circumstances. Reflection allows for an examination of the circumstances of a death. It analyses the issues and permits evaluation and identifies actions to be taken to deal with similar situations in the future or any general changes that can be made. To continue the FAI system in its present form prohibits effective scrutiny as to effectiveness. Instructing a review would ensure that effective monitoring and evaluation can take place where changes may be introduced without the need for major legislative reform. Those bereaved deserve more as does the public in funding this important death investigation system.

Gillian Mawdsley is a Scottish solicitor currently teaching academically at various universities with a longstanding interest and experience, as well as recent publications, on fatal accident inquiries.

Boomtime in McStrategy Land
- Neil Gilmour

Originally posted 18 September 2024

"*A goal without a plan is just a wish*." Antoine de Saint-Exupery

On Saturday 6th April 2024 at the Scottish Greens Spring Party Conference, I watched a tense and angry Patrick Harvie deliver the last rights to any hope of the SNP-Greens Alliance making meaningful progress together on a Just Energy Transition for Scotland. Shortly thereafter the alliance collapsed ignominiously with much finger pointing regarding who was to blame for missing most of the Scottish key environmental targets to 2030. There was precious little mea culpa and even less learning from the time together in Government. A month later this in turn sank Humza Yousaf who could no longer govern effectively.

One of the key contributory factors to this bitter "divorce" has been the Scottish Government's enthusiasm for developing and publishing strategies which have little or no hope of implementation. This results in a short-term "dopamine hit" as "we've thought hard about something (culture, energy transition, drug deaths…) and these are our views". Now just watch!

Regrettably this is rarely (if ever) followed up by much implementation. "A Culture Strategy for Scotland" is a prime example. This 61-page document was published in February 2020. It opens with "*Scotland is a place where culture is valued, protected and nurtured*." And continues in the same vein throughout. Regrettably so little progress had been made in the next three years it was felt necessary to issue in December 2023 "A Culture Strategy for Scotland: Action Plan". This 21-page document begins "*Scotland's culture is world famous. From the Borders to Shetland our extraordinary creative organisations, practitioners and passionate communities come together to create truly remarkable work, which we know has a real impact on the country's social and economic wellbeing*." In the subsequent 18 months Scotland's creative sector has been racked by crisis upon crisis. Funding is inadequate. Institutions fold. The most iconic cultural building in Scotland (Mackintosh's Glasgow Art School building) remains in ruins (unlike Notre Dame which was rebuilt in 5 years). So much for the valuing, protecting and nurturing.

In July 2024 Mariana Mazzucato (the Director and Professor in Economics and Innovation & Public Value at UCL) and Laurie Macfarlane (co-director of Future Economy Scotland) published a 75-page document entitled "A Mission-Oriented Industrial Strategy for Scotland". This begins *"Scotland faces an enormous set of interlocking challenges: the need to revitalise the economy while also transitioning to net zero tackling inequalities. These goals are not mutually exclusive."* Mazzucato is highly regarded ("the star economist who inspired Sir Keir Starmer's "missions" (The Telegraph)). She is currently working with multiple European Governments and has had excellent access to the senior ranks of the Scottish Government since Nicola Sturgeon's time as First Minister. Her report is well-crafted, eloquent even, and bold in scope. She describes the complex and interlocking nature of many of the key

challenges. The need for bold urgent multi-agency responses. The mix of emerging and legacy issues faced by the Scottish Government and the complexities of operating with a limited co-dependent political mandate. It's a compelling work, albeit perhaps lacking much insight on the "how". Or on the cost. Or the "grassroots" needs and expectations of us 5.6 million Scots. Or apparently even the emerging thoughts of the Scottish Government itself.

In September 2024 the Scottish Government issued its own 54-page "Green Industrial Strategy". This starts *"In the past two centuries there have been dramatic shifts in the sources of energy which power the global economy. Whether this was the move from wood and charcoal to coal in the nineteenth century or the transition to oil and gas in the twentieth century, each has driven extraordinary innovation, growth, and social change. Each of them brought challenges and each created extraordinary new opportunities."* It sets out 5 key areas of potential competitive advantage: the wind economy, carbon capture/storage, green professional services (with global reach), hydrogen, "Scotland as a competitive centre for the clean Energy intensive industries of the future". As is the "house style" there is precious little detail. In fact, the only dimensions appearing in the first 9 pages are bizarrely the intention to "*build 110 000 affordable homes by 2032*" …at an annual rate higher than the total completed since 2018…now that's undoubtedly ambitious! Perhaps less ambitious is the intention to "*Explore the potential and impact of modern methods of construction in rural and island contexts*" …a visit to any Scandinavian community might provide a rapid "exploratory route".

Predictably the Scottish Greens professed outrage at this document. The lack of attention to tidal and solar energies. The "fig leaf" of carbon storage for the oil and gas sector. The pile on included (perhaps predictably) Scottish Labour ("*detail-light*"), trade unions ("*nowhere near…bold and transformative action")*, the Lib-Dems (lack of Scottish supply chains). Far from creating a sense of the "*extraordinary new opportunities*" this document seems to have largely highlighted the threadbare nature of Scottish Government thinking.

Curiously, it also almost wholly ignores the 4-month-old thoughts of Mariana Mazzucato. No mission-oriented strategy this. Not one reference throughout. Perhaps some heavily camouflaged nods. But that's it. Strange.

But like the 2024 Mazzucato document, we, the Scottish people are curiously absent. As consumers. As communities. As stakeholders. Our needs are assumed. Our future described for us. Amongst all the "world class" and "circularity" and "reforming" and "modernising" there's almost nothing specific for us. Number of jobs? More equable community benefits from wind farms? "Glide path" for those of us in the oil and gas industry? Lower tax burden from better managing the renewables sector for Scotland? Restored landscapes? Nope. Nope. Nope. Nope. Certainly nope.

Many years ago, my Mum (a well-educated, environmentally savvy Ayrshire resident) asked me (after the largest onshore windfarm in Europe was announced to be built 5 miles from our family home) "*Do you think there will be much in this development for the people in Ayrshire*?". Regrettably in 2008 upon commissioning the answer was no. Foreign manufactured turbines. Foreign ownership. No community fund. No impact

upon consumer prices. In 2024, despite 16 years and billions of pounds worth of subsequent investment if most communities were to ask the same question about new developments, the answers would largely be the same.

There is another path. In 1972 a Norwegian Labour MP Rolf Hellem, wrote what became known as the "10 Oil Commandments" which formed the basic framework for all oil and gas activities on the Norwegian Shelf. And ultimately formed the foundation for the creation of a world-class industry, built one of the world's largest sovereign wealth funds and transformed the future of the Norwegian people for many generations to come. Rolf had travelled to the US and Canada to see how their well-established industries worked but rightly elected to craft a Norwegian-specific set of responses. Despite huge uncertainty about the scale of the energy resources. Despite enormous pressure from vested foreign commercial interests. Despite internal political wrangling…Rolf put the Norwegian people at the centre of his rules. Their needs. Their future…jobs, wealth, sustainability of the resources, value capture. And the rules were clearly written. Simple to understand. Bold. Implementable. The rules "stuck". For decades. Through boom-and-bust cycles. Changes of government. Despite the rise of competing basins. Despite Norway's "small" stature. And the rest is history.

We have one boom industry in Scotland. The strategy industry. It pours out tens of thousands of words. We drown in a flood of superlatives and hyperbole. So much intent. So little action. Endless pages and pages of dramatic language and deep contemplative "insight". Regrettably little, if any, of this helps address any of the myriad opportunities and challenges we 5.6 million Scots face.

When Dorothy and friends finally plucked up their courage to meet the Great and Powerful Oz he was "*a very good man…just a very bad wizard…*". It's time we pulled the curtain aside and revealed just how badly served we are by our strategy wizards.

Neil Gilmour is a former energy industry senior executive recently returned to Scotland having led numerous successful world-scale projects.

Ethical Concerns of the Health & Wellbeing Census - Lindsay Paterson

Originally posted 26 September 2024

New ethical concerns have been raised about a Scottish Government survey of the health and well-being of school students in 2021-22. This 'Health and Wellbeing Census' has already caused controversy, mainly because it asked young people intrusive questions about the life of their families, and also, for people in the fourth year of secondary school and later, about their sexual activity. Many children as young as 15 were thus asked about sex. The survey was carried out in 16 of the 32 local authorities. The others declined to run it because their councillors or officials shared the parental worries. Yet Nicola Sturgeon, in the Times Educational Supplement (9 December 2021), dismissed the objections as potentially 'whip[ping] up concern on the part of parents for completely unnecessary reasons'.

The new objections go deeper than these troubling questions. The entire ethical basis of the survey is deeply suspect. Drawing on a series of detailed FOI requests made by the chair of the Parental Council of an Edinburgh school, my analysis of the ethics of the survey concludes that the whole exercise is ethically dubious. It concludes also that researchers should not re-use the data because that would compound the ethical offence.

The survey covered the final three years of primary school (P5 to P7) and the full six years of secondary. It was a large project, with responses from 134,044 students, which was 58% of the target population. The questions asked of the respondents dealt with the ways in which 'attitudes to school, views on neighbourhood and life at home, physical health, and mental health and wellbeing differ by stage, sex and deprivation'. The survey's very broad interpretation of these aims led to the controversial questions about family life and sexual activity. The students had to answer the questionnaire online in class, supervised by a teacher.

There are six reasons to believe that the survey was unethical.

The first is about consent to take part. The Scottish government cited the 'public task' provisions of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) as conferring the authority to undertake the survey on the basis of parental opt-out. That is, consent was assumed provided that it was not withheld. Although this authority is probably legally valid, it is ethically dubious mainly because the survey extended far beyond the routine operation of schools. For the same reason, it may not even be legally valid according to the GDPR.

Numerous reputable research organisations advise that 'opt-out' consent is not acceptable ethically. The Scottish Government's own guidelines on social research that were in place when the survey was undertaken said that 'an opt-in basis' should always be the preferred method. The UK Information Commissioner advises that 'silence, pre-ticked boxes or inactivity' do not constitute consent. The guidelines of University College London – the UK's leading university in educational research – advises that

‘failure to opt out does not constitute consent for the purposes of the GDPR’. One reason is that parents were asked whether they wanted to opt out by means of a physical letter sent home with the student. As every parent knows, this kind of letter is easily missed amidst the usual hectic activities of school days.

The second problem is that the ethical and legal right to withdraw consent while responding to the survey was contravened because responses to survey questions that a student had entered before the point of withdrawal remained in the survey data base. This violates basic rights. In the words of the advice from the British Psychological Society, ‘every person from whom data are gathered … should be free during the data gathering phase to withdraw or modify their consent and to ask for the destruction of all or part of the data that they have contributed within agreed and consented limits’.
Third, the arrangement for supervision of school classes while they responded to the questionnaire was unsatisfactory. It did not give adequate specialist support to students who might have difficulty in answering the questions. It also did not give adequate privacy for students who might not want to reveal details to the class teacher or to other students in the class.

Fourth, the process of ethical approval to which the survey was subjected by the Scottish Government did not provide adequate ethical grounds for the choice of individual questions. The dominant ethical rationale for specific questions was that they had been asked in previous surveys done by other organisations. This not a sufficient ethical defence. For example, a question asked in a survey that is independent of government might be ethically acceptable, but not so when the agency doing the enquiry is an arm of government, or is an educational institution that is managerially responsible to government. The questions about sexual activity and family life are prime instances of that.

Fifth, the initial dataset that was compiled from the responses did not protect respondents’ anonymity. The Information Commissioner’s Office ruled in August 2023 that it posed a ‘serious risk’ of harms to students and that ‘the potential harms that may occur are high’. The main reason for that is that the survey identified individual students by their Scottish Candidate Number. These numbers are widely held in schools. They are readily accessible to any teacher or administrator who is involved in arranging the SQA assessments. In some local authorities they are also used as the basis of students’ email addresses (from primary school onwards, long before students are at the stage of taking SQA assessments). That is why the Information Commissioner was alarmed by the implications. Dozens – perhaps hundreds – of people who had access to the Candidate Numbers would, if they also had access to the data from the survey, know private details of identifiable students.

The final ethical problem is about data sharing. Respondents to the survey were not offered adequate information about plans to share the data with organisations outside the Scottish government and local authorities. The Government encourages researchers to link the data from the survey to other information on the people who responded to this survey, but respondents were not given the option of withholding or withdrawing consent for linkages. The ethical problem here is summed up by researchers from Oxford University (writing about consent for data sharing more

widely): ‘collecting research data from children and adolescents requires explicit parental consent as well as active assent from the children and adolescents, which can then be further complicated if the study collects data beyond age 16 when the adolescent will need to give their consent anew’.

No-one doubts the importance of research on young people’s well-being. The question is whether that research is done responsibly and with respect for respondents’ rights. The flaws in this Health and Wellbeing survey reveal a governing process that took no more than tokenistic account of the views of students and parents, and that operated with a cavalier disregard of ethical risk.

Lindsay Paterson is Professor Emeritus of Education Policy, Edinburgh University

Government spending and a whole load of pain - Johann Lamont

Originally posted 29 September 2024

A shorter version of this article appeared in The Scotsman on 28 September 2024

If you have ever been a member of a political party, trade union or local campaign group, you will know that securing the role of treasurer is rarely an ambition.

For activists, meetings can be great fun. Lots of ideas for action. Lots of plans for campaigning. Lots of discussion about when we could all get together to do good things. But then from the corner of the room comes a sigh, a muttering, and the treasurer intervenes. “Really? All these things? Immediately? Have you thought about the cost? Or the purpose? Or who would benefit? Did you look at the accounts I presented?”

And the meeting settles back a little huffily to consider the minutes. Who would be a treasurer, raining on the activist parade?

I do not wish to work the analogy too hard (as in Margaret Thatcher’s “a country’s economy is like a household budget”) but what passes for the “debate” on Scotland’s finances makes one yearn for “a grumpy treasurer” to be incorporated – alongside wisdom, compassion, justice and integrity – into the Scottish Parliament mace.

The habit of endlessly devising new ways to show voters how much the Parliament cares by offering free things is an easy and addictive one, but it all too often fails to pass the grumpy treasurer test. No thought for actual benefit, alternative approaches or unintended consequences. And only denunciation for those who might ask challenging questions.

Covid and all the trauma, disruption and cost it brought to bear on individuals, families and communities should surely have been a wake-up call, an opportunity to break with past certainties and establish serious politics where spending is about doing good, not just feeling good.

The shock of Covid exposed the vulnerabilities and inequalities baked into our society. We all suffered, but the impact of poverty and disadvantage was heightened and cruelly exposed. Surely now there would be rigorous analysis of how government acts and how, in the epidemic’s difficult aftermath, monies should be directed relentlessly to social and economic recovery?

It remains utterly bewildering to me that in the Scottish Parliament election of 2021, the manifesto offer from the SNP reverted to goodies – laptops and free bikes, anyone? – and the total absence of anything that approached the scale of the challenge that the post-Covid world presented. For example, a substantial education recovery plan – reflecting the horrendous impact of closed schools on so many young people – remains largely undeveloped.

There is a serious debate to be had, of course, about the balance between universal provision and targeted spending; the cost of creating eligibility tests in comparison with the simplicity of a universal approach; the challenge of ensuring that the support to those most in need is not diluted; that targeted spend must also be accompanied by support for uptake and an access to entitlement that is not deterred by complex application forms and unnecessary barriers.

But that debate is throttled in Scotland. Far easier to deny that these competing pressures, arguments and consequences exist. Just divide the world into good and bad, compassionate and monstrous, day and night.

Cartoons are fun, but politics and the choices they determine deserve better than sketched-in thinking.

This is surely not because we lack the capacity or ability to do the heavy lifting. The fear that, in acknowledging there are choices to be made, ground could be ceded to those who care little for social justice, equality and the need for action, is to deny the context of current political thinking across the mainstream.

I believe it would be fair to say that there is no longer a significant debate in Scotland about whether state intervention should be resisted or harnessed in the interests of social and economic priorities. There is a general acceptance in the political sphere that public services need to be funded and healthy public spending can have economic as well as social purpose. So the argument is not whether to spend, but what to spend and where that spending would be of most use.

Consequently, there really should be more seriousness – not less – in examining those choices.

But no. The comfort of the "retail offer" is embraced. The unintended consequences are waved away and the opportunity to harness the public purse in the interests of fairness and opportunity remains largely lost.

So, we can have baby boxes, with no analysis of their benefits, alongside a reduction in family support for vulnerable mothers and children.

We can have free tuition for those who make it to university, alongside attacks on second-chance learning through the cuts to further education funding; or the limiting of help (via home links, family support, support for learning in school, attendance initiatives) with the consequence that all too many bright youngsters drop out of school long before they can achieve their potential – or benefit from tuition fee funding.

We can have free bus travel and fewer bus routes in the communities most reliant on public transport.

And we can have free school meals of poorer nutritional quality alongside the virtual disappearance of the necessary support for vulnerable children and families in their own homes.

We can freeze council tax and watch as the services from libraries, social care and education falter.

So far, so obvious, you might think.

But, of course, the truth is that a serious case can be made for – almost all – of these universal offers. Free bus travel can help climate change targets if it takes people out of their cars and or it can reduce the social isolation of some older people. Free prescriptions may provide simplicity of administration and remove any deterrent to seeking medical help.

That there are serious arguments to be made is why politicians have backed away. The tentative steps of Humza Yousaf when First Minister to test the presumptions around some universal benefits were interesting. But that curiosity about what options might be examined lasted no longer than the First Minister himself. One can almost hear the sigh of relief as the SNP leadership settles back into its happy place of blaming 'Westminster austerity' for all our ills.

And thus we are back to the basics. The "arguments" around the political choices being made are boiled down again.

This is a good thing.

Opposing it is a bad thing.

There are no other ways of achieving our aims of doing good things.

It is as vacuous as it is maddening. There is never an acceptance that in public spending we are not choosing good over bad, but choosing and prioritising one good and worthy approach over another. The current approach encourages people to accept decisions that in reality are not in their interest. Their need for reliable services is too often squandered in the cause of political self-interest.

This cannot go on. In an uncertain world still stressed and challenged by Covid, there needs to be a renewed commitment to rigour and rational policy and decision making. Herein lie further dilemmas. It is not easy to draw back from an approach where people have seen individual benefits and appreciated them. Where parties have benefitted politically.

We see it now in the reaction to Labour plans to end the winter fuel payment for those not on pensioner credit on the grounds that it is costly and services are under severe pressure. The motives of a previous Labour government in the payment's introduction were rational and at a time where a process for means testing would have come at a disproportionate price.

It is evident it is paid to some people who do not need it. But people are up in arms. And instead of a testing of options to look at thresholds and the uptake of qualifying

benefits, the discourse, with some notable exceptions, has all too often been about why a Labour government is prepared to allow pensioners to freeze to death.

So past political failure to employ rigour in spending choices makes it more likely that politicians will back away. Who wants to be the person who has it as their political purpose to freeze the elderly, starve the young or leave the ill untreated?

There needs to be an understanding that past hyperbole about these benefits in order to make an electoral offer now results in political paralysis – with those who most desperately need change suffering most.

But there are other consequences, and these are insidious too.

In a system where some policy choices are deemed untouchable – because they offer political opponents too many sticks for the purpose of back-beating – cuts in services fall most on areas where there is indifference, or a lack of awareness of services which most people will not need. Cuts to care services, largely unseen but felt in the further burden placed on unpaid carers. Cuts in school funding, which reduces resources and school trips which better-off families can make up for in their own budgets. Cuts to drugs and rehabilitation services, community and justice social work, among others, where support that looms large in the lives of some go unnoticed by most of us.

The refusal to be serious is played out in a thousand ways every day, at the expense of those without the voice, means or energy to demand better.

And of course, we now see tough choices of a sort being made. With council tax set to rise, we end up asking people to pay more at precisely the same point where the services they get in return – in education, health and even in cleansing – are poorer and more unreliable.

This is the further consequence and unhappy conundrum for politicians. Having broken the link between taxation, our personal responsibility to contribute, and our benefit from such investment, it is doubly difficult to reestablish that principle when the services we seek to fund seem broken.

This is the worst of all places. Paralysis and slogan swapping neither match the seriousness of these times nor the aspirations of a Scottish Parliament that was established to bring political decisions closer to our communities and make change real in people's lives.

We need maturity and seriousness. We need government to think about how we can start doing serious policy-making again.

And one last thing. There has been a deeper malaise that goes beyond the universal/targeting debate.

Those with power should understand and respect the huge privilege of having the power to make spending decisions with public money. It is a privilege that should not

be taken lightly. Too often we have seen monies spent without apparent thought, then written off as failure with little apparent regret. There is too much spending without account, whether on copious amounts of ministers, or in increasing the number of spin doctors, or on special advisers, or on the latest wheeze which generates a good press release but little more.

It is not right wing or unprogressive to test all spending options and be frugal in decisions. After all, every penny spent on one area without much thought is an opportunity lost elsewhere. And while the housewife analogy is outdated and not entirely appropriate, thrift and respect for the power of spending choices should not be dismissed.

This seriousness should shape the work of the opposition, too. Their job is, of course, to challenge, test, and provide serious alternatives. But they should resist at all costs the easy hit, the quick denunciation. That will entrench the paralysis, not liberate us from it. Whisper it – aspire to consensus where possible and honesty and rigour always. There is a huge privilege in power and having the capacity to spend public money. My advice? Embrace and channel your inner grumpy treasurer.

'Really? What is the cost? What is the benefit? And are we doing this to feel better or to do better?'

Serious times demand no less.

Johann Lamont was leader of Scottish Labour from 2011 to 2014, and an MSP between 1999 and 2021. She is a member of Reform Scotland's Commission on School Reform

Caledonia Dreaming
- Neil Gilmour

Originally posted 2 October 2024

"A community is like a ship; everyone ought to be prepared to take the helm." Henrik Ibsen
Life for many Scots is very tough. Rising poverty, particularly impacting the young and most vulnerable. The highest energy bills in Britain and the worst fuel poverty in Europe despite large indigenous energy resources. A large creative sector where many workers are barely able to eke out a living. Innovative start-ups facing glacially slow regulatory hurdles and passive government support. Local city democracy where process and inflexibility marginalise communities and erodes public trust. A green transition that is either partly stalled or looks designed to boost the margins of big incumbents rather than lift the lives of ordinary Scots.

Ten years after the 2014 Independence Referendum vote this wasn't what anyone asked or hoped for. Whether you wanted the sunlit uplands of an Independent Scotland or renewed vows with the Union, none of the above was on the ballot paper. But here we are. Stuck.

Of course, there are endless explanations and excuses for our plight…Brexit, the Tories, the SNP, Covid, the international situation, Holyrood, Westminster, neo-liberalism, the Labour Party, the Scottish Greens…on and on and on. Largely partisan. All incomplete. None offering a practical positive path ahead.

What is perhaps most peculiar is the jarring dissonance between these problems and the capacity of us, the 5.5 million Scots, and Scotland more widely. *Why are things so difficult when we have all the possibilities and solutions in our own hands? And why don't we change our future accordingly?*

Like communities all over Scotland I am surrounded by amazing people of all ages and backgrounds. Doctors, writers, teachers, parents, plumbers, academics, stonemasons, lawyers, students…you name it, we have it locally. We have longer-term residents who understand the history of our neighbourhood. Diverse more recent arrivals bringing new ideas and perspectives. Artists who work here and are inspired by their surroundings. Neighbours starting businesses. Groups helping improve our green spaces. If we had to "run" our neighbourhood we could. But we don't.

Where I live, we rely upon the City of Edinburgh Council. The council have a new vision for Edinburgh: "City Plan 2030". This took over six years to produce. In preparing this they received over 2000 pages of feedback but still managed to produce a lengthy, largely unread, and even more largely utopian and unrealistic picture of our future home *(e.g. "We are committed to eliminating poverty, ensuring residents have enough money to live on, have access to work, learning and training opportunities and have a good place to live.")*. Having just published Edinburgh 2030 the Planning Department is now embarking upon "City Plan 2040".

Would it not be better…richer…more credible…to engage the communities of Edinburgh to do this 2040 work instead? Who knows our city better than us? Who has more expertise? Who has a greater vested interest in making the city a success than us? Greener. With better transportation. And housing. And schooling. Not as an afterthought as impotent "editors" but as the authors and deeply invested stakeholders that we are. Working with other communities and the council to create a joint plan that we will execute together.

The Arts in Scotland stagger from one crisis to the next. Ten years after our most important cultural icon (the Mackintosh School of Art) in Glasgow first burned it lies in ruins with no coherent prospect of restoration. Paris triumphantly rebuilt Notre Dame in less than half the time (likewise Windsor Castle). On average most workers in the creative industries would be better rewarded stacking shelves full time in Lidl. Our funding processes are so complex some individuals are spending months tackling paperwork with no guarantee of success. Creative Scotland consumes over £8 million annually funding itself. Our art schools churn out hundreds of graduates with virtually zero understanding of how to make a living. This systematically disadvantages those from less prosperous backgrounds.

We do not lack architects. Or project managers. Or historians with understanding of Mackintosh's craft. We formerly managed the Arts in Scotland with a handful of experts and individual submissions of a few pages. There are modern more democratic ways of doing the same while engaging the wider artistic community. There are many experienced creative people who could demystify how to make a decent living as an artist as part of our academic courses. We can build upon the supportive expertise-rich Screen Scotland model rather than subjecting overloaded impoverished artists to mere bureaucracy. We could democratise the arts by reintegrating creativity into our schools, our workplaces, our communities. This would make our lives happier, our artists more engaged and prosperous and our children's lives richer.

And how would we pay for this? One large and near-untapped source of wealth in Scotland is renewables. Having already invested billions in Scottish wind energy there is at least twice as much scope again to come. However, this does very little for 5.5 million of us in terms of jobs or community wealth or national prosperity. The potential and prosperity of renewables is bypassing Scotland. Permits yield little "rent". Community benefits are trivial (while communities onshore suffer disruption and visual impact). The hardware is almost exclusively manufactured outside Scotland. The export network is painful to execute for rural communities. The energy largely flows South. The revenue flows to privately infrastructure, power and upstream producers, many foreign owned.

By way of another renewables example, we have tidal energy where we are falling behind in our international competitiveness and losing out purely due to our own inaction. Getting projects from drawing board to first power is painfully slow (typically 7-12 years versus Canada's 2 years). The lack of a Scottish stock exchange or a significant investment ecosystem, means there is little access to capital for growing companies in industrial sectors, they must look abroad for investment and the

companies are eventually lost to Scotland. The absence of a long-term Scottish industrial plan not only stifles growth, but it also extinguishes hope.

We don't lack the raw resources. Nor innovative engineers. Nor the appetite to design and build in Scotland. Nor communities willing to work in genuinely balanced partnerships with the renewables sector. Nor the workforce to sustain this complex network once built. We could turn this system on its head. Drive wider collaboration. Put citizens needs at the centre, rather than those of large corporations. Boost the impact upon the 5.5 million. Accelerate project definition and implementation. Lower our carbon footprint and build national wealth. Transform the lives of the communities who cohabit with the infrastructure. Balance large scale strategic infrastructure with a myriad of small local schemes defined and run for and by communities.

None of this is easy. Or impossible. Yet much of it has been successfully executed elsewhere. In Norway in the oil and gas sector. In Ireland where the Citizen Assembly wrestles with the biggest and most complex national issues. In Singapore where central planning attracts the brightest and best and relentlessly focuses upon making Singapore a success for all. In British Columbia where the giant Canada LNG export project boosts domestic procurement, indigenous employment, community and national wealth.

In the 2014 Independence Prospectus, much was made of an Independent Scotland "closing gaps" with other small prosperous nations, including Norway, Ireland, Singapore. Regrettably this has not happened. In most regards the gaps grew. Ambition shrank. Leadership behaviours became more parochial, partisan and blinkered. Utopian self-serving "strategy" proliferates while most Scots lives get worse.

The temptation is to return to finger-pointing…Brexit, the Tories, the SNP, Covid, the international situation, Holyrood, Westminster, neo-liberalism, the Labour Party, the Scottish Greens…

But perhaps there is a different response…what if all our institutions started working in service of the 5.5 million of us? And innovatively pulled in our amazing expertise to solve the big (and small) challenges together? What if collaboration and building alliances across organisations and borders was relentlessly and obsessively pursued? What if we unleashed the sleeping capacity in our communities? What if the green transition focussed upon improving 5.5. million lives rather than simply growing balance sheets? What if encouraging our kids to be creative was valued and our creative people could live decent lives? What if we treated the Mac like Notre Dame and it relentlessly rose phoenix-like within a democratised Glasgow city plan? What if Edinburgh (and our other cities) in 2040 were wonderful homes for millions of us because we created them in genuine partnership with local government? What if living in a greener rural environment was good for all communities…because local voices held greatest sway?

We were never given today's status quo as an option on a ballot paper. We don't have to aim low. We have the resources and the people and the skills to transform our future. Other nations have achieved this from much more challenging origin points. We

don’t have to be mired in finger-pointing. Or accept leadership that cares more about its own internal needs than ours. Or is unwilling or unable to work collaboratively in service of us 5.5. million.

We are the people. This is our country. Creating a better Scotland for us all need not be a dream.

Neil Gilmour is a former energy industry senior executive recently returned to Scotland having led numerous successful world-scale projects.

Scotland's Reading Crisis: Hiding in Plain Sight - Darren Leslie

Originally posted 10 October 2024

Scotland faces a growing literacy crisis, with up to 30% of secondary students reading two or more years below their age level, and some as much as seven or eight years behind. Despite strong evidence supporting structured, evidence-based reading instruction, outdated methods like "cueing" remain prevalent in Scottish classrooms. While other countries are adopting scientifically-proven techniques to improve literacy, Scotland's hesitance to fully commit to these reforms risks leaving many children struggling to read.

A Missed Opportunity for Reform

Scotland's literacy challenges are not a recent development. The Clackmannanshire Study, published in the early 2000s, was a landmark piece of research that demonstrated the effectiveness of systematic synthetic phonics (SSP). The study revealed that children taught with phonics not only excelled in word reading but also in comprehension and spelling. Despite these compelling findings, Scotland has made limited progress in implementing the study's recommendations at a national level.

In contrast, England took decisive action following the 2006 Rose Review, which highlighted the importance of SSP. The review led to mandated phonics instruction in English schools, along with the introduction of the Phonics Screening Check in 2012. As a result, England has seen improvements in literacy and is now ranked near the top in international reading assessments. Scotland has yet to implement similar reforms.

Contrasting Approaches to Reading Instruction

There is a clear distinction between cueing methods and systematic synthetic phonics in teaching children to read. Cueing encourages children to guess words using context, such as pictures or sentence structure. For instance, in a predictable text with sentences like "I have a cat," "I have a dog," or "I have a horse," a child using cueing strategies might guess the word "horse" based on the accompanying illustration rather than decoding the word. This approach often leads to reliance on guessing, rather than the development of actual reading skills.

Systematic synthetic phonics, on the other hand, teaches children to decode words by breaking them down into individual sounds (phonemes) and blending them together. In the example above, a child learning through phonics would decode "horse" by recognizing and blending the sounds /h/, /o/, /r/, and /s/, reinforcing phonetic awareness and word recognition. This method ensures that children can read unfamiliar words without relying on external cues.

International Success and Scotland's Lagging Progress

While many countries are reforming their literacy instruction, Scotland remains behind. Cueing strategies, which encourage guessing rather than decoding, continue to dominate classrooms despite decades of evidence showing their ineffectiveness.

Experts like Professor Rhona Stainthorp have long advocated for explicit decoding instruction for all students, emphasizing that systematic approaches are essential even for children who initially seem to grasp reading easily.

Internationally, there are numerous examples of successful reading reforms. In Ontario, Canada, the Human Rights Commission launched an inquiry in 2022, condemning cueing methods and advocating for a phonics-first approach. Similarly, the U.S. National Reading Panel's report has reinforced the necessity of phonics instruction for developing literacy. Australia's education reforms, led by figures like Ben Carroll MP, have also prioritised phonics, reflecting a global consensus on its critical role in reading success.

Scotland's Current Approach: Insufficient and Ineffective

Scotland's continued reliance on outdated methods is highlighted by similar struggles seen in Wales, where cueing strategies remain common, and reading scores have consistently fallen below the average. Rhys Williams, in his ITV report, drew attention to the urgent need for reform, underscoring the long-term consequences of inaction. Critics argue that Scotland's recent efforts, such as new reading resources from Education Scotland, do not go far enough. Allowing teachers to choose their own methods, in an environment where many lack a deep understanding of the science of reading, is unlikely to drive the necessary improvements.

The Need for Systematic Phonics Instruction

To address Scotland's literacy crisis, systematic synthetic phonics must become the foundation of early reading instruction in all schools. Phonics equips children with the tools to decode unfamiliar words by linking letters to sounds. This approach, unlike cueing, consistently benefits all learners, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Countries that have embraced phonics, such as England, Australia, and parts of Canada and America, have seen marked improvements in reading outcomes. In Scotland, however, calls for mandatory phonics instruction and teacher training in the science of reading have been largely ignored. Without action, the country risks falling further behind.

Teacher Training: The Key to Reform

A major barrier to improving literacy in Scotland is the lack of teacher knowledge about effective reading instruction. Many educators are not sufficiently trained in the science of reading, which leaves them ill-equipped to implement evidence-based practices. Without a concerted effort to train teachers, especially those new to the profession, Scotland's literacy crisis will only deepen. Despite petitions and advocacy for systematic phonics instruction, the government's resistance to mandating these reforms remains a significant obstacle.

The Time for Change Is Now

Scotland's literacy crisis requires immediate action. The evidence is overwhelming: systematic synthetic phonics works, while cueing methods fail to provide the necessary foundation for reading success. As other nations respond to this evidence with

meaningful reform, Scotland risks leaving a generation of children unable to read proficiently. Urgent reforms, including mandated phonics instruction and comprehensive teacher training, are essential to prevent further decline. The future of Scotland's literacy depends on decisive action today.

Darren Leslie has been a teacher for over a decade and currently lives and works in Fife. He hosts the Becoming Educated podcast

A Compromise on a Scottish Visa Could Bring Out the Best in Our Politics

- Stephen Gethins

Originally posted 22 October 2024

During a campaign, it is not unusual to hear politicians seeking to build support for a particular position or party by floating eye-catching ideas to appeal to the wider public – that is the stuff of politics and campaigns should be about ideas. What is perhaps more unusual is when the same idea is floated by politicians from different political parties.

Just before the EU Referendum in 2016, Michael Gove suggested that Scotland should decide its immigration policy if the Leave campaign was successful. This was seen by Brexiteers, though never acted on, as being a way of blunting the devastating impact of leaving the EU on the Scottish sectors that had relied on our freedom of movement as well as the wider implications of losing that freedom.

Similarly, just before this year's General Election and eight years on from Mr Gove's commitment, it was the Labour Deputy Leader Jackie Baillie who said that her party was open to talks with the Scottish Government about a Scottish visa.

It is easy to see why. Leading industries such as the food and drink tourism sectors and our incredibly international higher education institutions, among others, relied on freedom of movement to bring in much-needed labour. This also ensured that Scotland, and the UK for that matter, was a more attractive place in which to live and work for migrants and their families.

In response to the issue being discussed in Parliament recently, Leon Thompson, the Executive Director of UK Hospitality Scotland, told the Herald:
"The hospitality and tourism industry across Scotland have been calling for a Scotland visa for some time. We believe it really is one of the ways in which we can help address the skills and workforce shortage that we have in the industry."

Our society is struggling with the impact of Brexit, the Home Office's hostile environment, a demographic challenge and the twin issues of emigration and immigration. In an international and inter-connected world, we cannot be blind to these challenges.

That is why two weeks ago I indicated to the Speakers Office that I would like to bring forward private members legislation to allow greater devolution of immigration.

I was initially pleased last week when I heard Labour MPs make positive noises about such a move. In response to an intervention I made on a Scottish visa, Glasgow MP John Grady said:
"Scottish Labour and the Labour party are in favour of bringing talented people into Scotland, and the Scottish Government are welcome to work with us as we seek to ensure that that takes place. As I understand it, the Home Secretary is determined to ensure that

it does, and I also understand that the Migration Advisory Committee is looking at the issue carefully."

In addition to that, Western Isles MP Torcuil Crichton, who has spoken out on the demographic challenges facing his own rural constituency, stated:
"When it comes to immigration policy, one size does not fit all. It shouldn't be beyond us to devise ways to attract more people to work and settle here."

But we did not have to wait too long for the Home Office to quash this bout of independent thinking from Labour MPs. The Home Office told the Times that such a visa *"is not government policy and not something the Home Secretary is considering"*.

That is a great pity. Torcuil Crichton and I may be in different parties, but he was right. It should not be beyond us to find a solution to how we can find ways to give Scotland more of a say on migration. Devolution always meant that there was a recognition that there is no one-size-fits-all solution across the UK. This is the case for a migration system that applies a common policy for Scotland and the south-east of England – two parts of the UK with quite distinctive needs.

There are a variety of ways this could work. Earlier this year, Reform Scotland published *Working Better, Together*, setting out ideas whereby the Scottish and UK governments could work together more effectively. One of these areas was having a "Scottish immigration policy", recognising that while Scotland faced demographic challenges the policies of Labour and the Conservatives meant that *"Scotland's needs may be overlooked"*. Suggestions included removing Scotland from the immigration cap, allowing people to work in Scotland but not elsewhere in the UK, or Scotland-specific schemes such as Fresh Talent.

This would not be unique: other devolved administrations, even those with asymmetrical devolution, illustrate that decentralised migration policy can work. Both Canada and Australia have systems with decentralised migration policies that are prescriptive about where migrants can settle. This is included in a Canada-Quebec accord, for instance.

I am not suggesting for one moment that we simply cut and paste the system from another jurisdiction. However, by bringing together both the Scottish and UK Government, MPs and MSPs from across the political spectrum as well as key stakeholders, including Reform Scotland, we must be able to make some progress.

Part of that must be a more sensible approach to how we debate and discuss migration. There needs to be a recognition that migration is hugely influential in our society. No-one in Scotland, no matter how recently we or our forebears arrived in this north-eastern part of Europe, can say that migration has never affected them. It remains a contributor to our society's development.

We owe it to our world-leading industries to have a better discussion and debate. Working in the Higher Education sector I saw at first-hand how migration is one of the

key components that makes the sector a global leader, in the process enriching the learning experience for Scottish students.

Other sectors such as care and the NHS also rely heavily on immigrants. Both are struggling with the double whammy of Brexit and a broken UK immigration system.
The Home Office's remarks were disappointing, but all is not lost. My private members bill has been introduced in the very broadest terms. What is more, it does not have a second reading until April next year (unless of course the Government grants it time before then).

The terms of that legislation means there is scope for compromise and innovative solutions to be introduced. No one in Parliament has a monopoly of wisdom, and people also expect us to find common ground and seek to work together where possible.

Leaving the EU has been disastrous for our industries and services. I want to see Scotland re-join the EU as an Independent Member State. In the interim, and regardless of one's views on that issue, I think we all have a responsibility to make things better. This is an idea that has cross-party and cross-sector approach in Scotland and would be a great first step in demonstrating that parties, stakeholders and both governments can come together and reach agreement on even the thorniest issues. That would be something for us all to celebrate.

Stephen Gethins is the MP for Arbroath & Broughty Ferry and Professor of International Relations at the University of St Andrews

Grangemouth no more ....?
- Stuart Paton

Originally posted 29 October 2024

Grangemouth is closing! This headline has appeared in a wide range of publications over the last few weeks. What does actually mean and can we do anything about it.

Grangemouth is the largest industrial complex in Scotland and a location with a long and proud heritage. The location of the plant is, at least partly, due to the historical legacy of shale oil refining, developed by James 'Paraffin' Young. Indeed, a reminder of this history is still visible on approach to Edinburgh airport with the few remaining shale bings being visible (many of the rest form the base of the local motorway network). Another important factor is the proximity to the Grangemouth docks which have long imported oil from the middle east- since 1954 there has also been a pipeline to the west coast Finnart Terminal for access to North America markets. The Grangemouth complex had two main purposes- the refining of crude oil from a number of sources, including the North Sea, and a connected petrochemicals complex which produces a wide variety of products. The complex was owned for many years by BP (and predecessor companies). BP sold the complex to Innovene in 2005 as part of a worldwide divestment from key chemical industry, with this company being bought by Ineos later that year. Indeed, the sale by BP was part of a wider trend by the major oil companies to reduce their involvement in the refining part of the oil and gas industry. Ineos entered into a joint venture with Petrochina in 2011 which covered the Grangemouth refinery (but not petrochemiocals plant) and the Ineos refinery at Laverra in France. It is the joint venture, Petroineos, which has announced the closure of Grangemouth. The refinery currently employs 475 with the terminal likely employing fewer than 100. The company plan on developing a finished fuels import terminal.

Forties Pipeline System is also based out of the Grangemouth site and employs about 100 people. A key risk to the ongoing operation of the pipeline system and jobs is the government's approach to upstream oil and gas taxation which could have a devastating effect on the fields which feed in to the pipeline.

A point largely unmentioned is that it is only the refinery that is closing. Albeit this affects about 400 jobs and a significant knock on effect in the local area. However, Petroineos have committed to keeping the petrochemicals plant opens which employs about 1,000 people. The plant produces annually about 1.3 million tonnes of products including ethanol (although this is due to cease in 2025 with the loss of 40 jobs), ethylene, olefins and polymers. Although not without their issues, in relation to waste and sustainability, we will presumably keep using these plastics even as petrol and diesel consumption declines. One may justifiably ask how long the petrochemcical plant will remain open but there is significant financial investment in the onloading facilities to provide feedstock for the plant.

So, why is the refinery closing?

The short term answer is that this is an economic decision. Unfortunately, this is part of a longer term decline in the facility with various parts of the plant being closed over the last 5 years. The plant, run by a cost focussed operator in Petroineos, is estimated to make losses of $500,000 per day. Presumably substantial capital investment would be required to maintain and upgrade the relatively old plant to modern international standards. Longer term the closure is due to overcapacity in the international refining business, reduction in North Sea oil production and future bans on diesel and petrol engine cars.

There have of course been wails of despair in the press about this planned closure. But what are the alternatives?

Some commentators and politicians have argued that we need to maintain the Grangemouth refinery for security of supply. However, between 60-80% of UK oil production is exported currently and we import a large proportion of our requirements. Grangemouth has 12% of UK oil refining capacity with a 6 refineries elsewhere in the country (although Grangemouth is of course the only one in Scotland). UK oil producers are increasing selling their product on international markets partly for practical reasons due to sulphur content and partly due to North Sea crude achieving better prices in the Middle East. This does not seem to be a strong argument for a risk to supply with the closure of the refinery.

Other commentators, including the local MP, have made the case for nationalisation of the refinery. However, what is the rationale for doing this? I have already argued there is not a security of supply issue. Petroineos is well known for running a lean operation so it is hard to envisage turning round a loss making facility. Could the government invest money to upgrade the facilities? It is hard to imagine a UK or Scottish government investing in an oil and gas refinery while having legal obligations to achieve NetZero, against an international market place which has over capacity. And could this be justified as a good use of capital when private money is not prepared to invest?

The saddest issue is the length of time the potential closure has been known about and how little has been achieved in this time. Grangemouth Future Industry Board was set up in October 2020 with representative from Scottish Government, Scottish Enterprise, Falkirk Council, Scottish Futures Trust, Skills Development Scotland and Transport Scotland- but notably not the owners of the plant. About 15 meetings have been held since 2020 with the most recent one being on 17th October 2024. The plant owners and unions have become involved during this time while this year the UK Government have attended. Going through the minutes, it is difficult to work out what has actually been discussed during these meetings. There is a lot of talk of 'priorities' and Project Willow but without any concrete plans. The most recent UK government statement talks positively about £100 million being invested in skills training which is obviously very welcome. The Industry Board also talks about 'urgently assessing long term industries at the refinery site including low carbon hydrogen, clean eFuels and sustainable aviation fuels'. As an aside there is no mention of the Forth Green Freeport, which one would have thought would give Grangemouth alternative options compared with other sites. It would be hugely oversimplistic to suggest there are easy answers or simple alternatives. However, this body has been in place for four years and does not

seem to have presented any solid ideas or plans. This is a huge failure in both industrial and political leadership.

In the meantime, other plants are showing alternative routes. The Stanlow refinery in Cheshire, which is a similar size to Grangemouth, was sold by Shell to Essar Oil in 2011. In addition to stepping in to the market for Scottish fuels, Stanlow will start production of low carbon hydrogen and invest in carbon capture and storage as part of the Hynet initiative. Shell are closing their oil refinery at Wesseling in Germany in 2025, and converting the hydrocracker unit to produce engine oils. I am not suggesting that all of these ideas will come to fruition. However, it is clearly a failure of political and industrial leadership in Scotland that we cannot present a real plan at all.

As we decarbonise the economy, a number of industries will not be required or will dramatically reduce in scale. Although most models, including those from the Climate Change Committee, show a place for oil even by 2050, the much lower volumes required for petrol and diesel will lead to a significant reduction in refining capacity. The requirement to reduce capacity of a range of industries puts a large question mark over the meaning and practicalities of delivering a 'Just Transition'.

At heart though, this episode is a damning indictment of our industrial and political leadership, that even with several years warning, we cannot develop a credible plan for the Grangemouth refinery site. However, we should hold on and publicise the positives- a new import terminal and continued operation (at least for now) of the petrochemicals plant. And do better next time.

Stuart Paton is an energy industry advisor and former Chief Executive of Dana Petroleum. He is also an associate of Reform Scotland

Why we need better statistical data for Scottish education

- Lindsay Paterson

Originally posted 17 November 2024

The quality of statistical evidence on Scottish education is poor. Although useful summary information is published annually, that provides no more than a bare description of the system. The existing data provide no insights into how effective Scottish education is, where its strengths and weaknesses are, and how it might be improved. Few of the statistical sources allow valid comparison with other countries.

The purpose of the report published today by Reform Scotland's Commission on School Reform is to propose a new statistical framework that would transform the range and quality of statistical data on Scottish education. The data proposed here would be objective and politically neutral. It would thus strengthen the basis of educational policy-making, and would offer the opportunity for sustained educational improvement.

The most notable current gaps in data are:

- There is no way of analysing pupils' learning from the point at which they enter pre-school education at age 3 or 4 to the point at which they leave school. Individual children can be tracked, but no data set collates this into a form that might give insights into the performance of schools, local authorities or the system as a whole, nor into how pupils' home circumstances affect their learning.
- There is no statistical evidence on effective teaching strategies: advice on this is wholly dependent on evidence from other countries. Learning from elsewhere is indeed very important, but that has to be translated into a local context, which cannot be done in any well-informed way here.
- There is no systematic information about young people's subjective experiences in school, for example in relation to bullying, misbehaviour or absence from school altogether. There is no data set that would allow any understanding of how these experiences relate to pupils' learning.
- The statistical evidence on the transition from school to work and post-school education is superficial.

In Scotland, schooling is thus a black hole out of which no information escapes that might be useful to immediate policy.

Nevertheless, amidst the general gloom, there are scattered examples of good statistical practice. Better data can be developed by building on these. The best-known is Scotland's participation in the Programme for International Student Assessment – the PISA studies – which happen every three years in about half of the world's countries, under the auspices of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development. This has become the model for high-quality surveys of education systems. In other countries it is supplemented by surveys that are tailored to the

specific characteristics of the national education system. Scotland provides nothing of that kind.

But the PISA studies are not enough. They catch pupils at only one moment in their progress – at age around 15. So they tell us nothing about how they got there, nor about the role of schools in helping or hindering them.

There is one very high-quality Scottish survey – Growing Up in Scotland. This has been tracking a cohort of children who were born around 2005. It has built up a rich body of evidence on progress in the period since then. But it is only one cohort, and there are no plans to follow any new cohorts. This means, for example, that there is no way of using this survey to evaluate the impact of Curriculum for Excellence because the cohort started primary school in the year when the new curriculum was extended across all schools. There is no baseline evidence with which to compare these new experiences.

There is good-quality evidence on attainment from the Scottish National Standardised Assessments and from the Scottish Qualifications Authority, but these bodies of evidence exist in isolation from each other. The information which they produce is thus not collated in any form that would be useful for understanding the progress of pupils. Drawing on the strengths of these and a few other examples of good practice, the Briefing proposes a new statistical framework for Scottish school education, based on two proposed new resources and a new context for the governance of statistical data:
Regular sample surveys of pupils

New sample surveys would gather evidence about pupils' progress right through their time at school – starting in Primary 1, gathering further information in Primary 4, Primary 7, and Secondary 3, and having a final questionnaire shortly after leaving school. There would be a new such longitudinal sample started every three years.
These sample surveys would collect information about curriculum, attainment, experience of school, and students' social circumstances. At primary-school level, information would also be gathered from the class teacher about teaching methods, so as to contribute to understanding how these methods contribute to students' progress. Data on attainment would come from the Scottish National Standardised Assessments and from the Scottish Qualifications Authority.

At the primary-school stages, the information on home circumstances would be asked from parents. At Secondary 3 and in the school-leaving stage it would be collected directly from the students. All participation would be voluntary by the students, and would also require active parental consent for all but the school-leaving stage: that is, the parents would have to agree explicitly to take part, not merely not opt out. Communication with the students and with their parents would be direct, not via the school. Only in these ways can the evidence be said to be wholly independent of the school system.

Annual tracking data on all students
Information about attainment would be collated annually. The purpose is to analyse pupil progress. As in the proposed surveys, the attainment in primary and early

secondary would be measured by the Scottish National Standardised Assessments, and in later school stages by the results of SQA assessments. So this dataset would be a collation of information that is already held in fragmented ways. The model is the National Pupil Data Base in England, which tracks pupils from age 2 to 21. and has been running successfully and uncontroversially since 2002.

The universal coverage of the tracking would be a firm basis for assessing standards across Scotland. The number of participants would be large enough to provide reliable information about individual schools, and thus to hold schools accountable in public in a manner that would be more informative, and fairer to schools, than the current practice of reporting the results of SQA assessments and of some basic data on progression beyond school.

Office for Scottish Education Data

This new data environment would be overseen by a new Office for Scottish Education Data. As well as being responsible for these two surveys, the Office would take charge of the full range of statistical data on Scottish school education, including, for example, all the statistical bulletins that are currently published by the Scottish government. Its responsibilities would extend to post-school data. The Office would be required to ensure comparability of Scottish statistical measures with those compiled in the rest of the UK and, where possible, the rest of Europe. The Office should be accountable directly to the Scottish Parliament, not to the government. It would be funded by a grant from the Parliament.

Lindsay Paterson is Professor Emeritus of Education Policy at the University of Edinburgh

Time to get serious on public sector reform - Michael Marra

Originally posted 18 November 2024

The Chancellor's Budget – the first Labour Budget in 14 years – delivered the largest settlement for the Scottish Government in the history of devolution.

This means record investment by the UK Labour Government in Scotland, with an additional £1.5 billion this financial year and a further £3.4 billion next year.

This Budget powers forward the change that a Labour Government is making. It is only possible because Scotland turned the page on years of division and elected Labour MPs to the heart of a Labour Government. No more shouting from the sidelines, instead key players in the team.

This has allowed Rachel Reeves to turn the page on austerity. The budget marks a definitive end to fourteen years of decline; stabilising the public finances to prioritise economic growth and investment in our vital public services.

This is a significant moment in our nation's history – an end to Tory chaos, and the beginning of rebuilding our country.

This is an opportunity for change in Scotland that cannot – that must not – be wasted. Reform of public services is not easy. If it was then even the SNP might have managed it. But the challenge cannot excuse the reality. Repeated failure to reform our school system as performance in international comparisons continues to decline. NHS workers struggling to treat patients in a system that is yet to face up to the reality of an ageing population with equipment that is years out of date. A competent government could have made a difference instead of prioritising division and managing decline. It is clear that reform is needed. We know our public services are not working as they should.

A time of significantly increased investment in Scotland is exactly the moment to make change for the long term good of the country. It is an opportunity that cannot be squandered.

The SNP's wasteful, woeful approach to budgeting has been widely acknowledged by independent analysts, by cross-party committees of parliament this very month, and by the Scottish Fiscal Commission. Our national fiscal forecaster has identified a gap between SNP spending promises and available funding of £1.9 billion come 2028-29. Services and businesses have endured three consecutive years now of vast emergency in-year budget cuts. There is a complete refusal from the Scottish Government to confront the long-term challenges facing Scotland's finances.

The new £3.4 billion of additional funding from the Labour Government for next year cannot be lost into the SNP budget black hole created through their incompetence and failure to plan.

A different path is possible. Choosing investment over decline. What could this look like?

A Scottish Labour Government would be putting plans in motion immediately to upgrade health technology targeted at raising productivity in the NHS, cutting waiting times and getting people the treatment they need more quickly so they can get on with their lives. The benefits to our economy of a healthy workforce are obvious, but at present we see worrying trends in increasing numbers of people out of work due to ill health, many of them waiting too long for diagnosis and for treatment. Achieving the economic growth that our country needs, to increase revenue and fund public services, depends on having a strong, productive workforce.

Right now, Labour would be overhauling our skills system, giving renewed purpose to a college sector on its knees and, instead of plundering energy funds, investing Scotwind money in an urgent programme of supply chain partnerships for the energy transition. Skills, education, jobs and a brighter, cleaner future.

And crucially we would not turn away from the tough decisions of making efficiencies because there is money on the table. We would double down on cost cutting bureaucracy across public bodies by instituting zero based budgeting across the board. If the policy does not work, then the policy stops. An end to a culture of waste that has seen the SNP burn £5 billion of public money through gross incompetence over the past 17 years – the almost exact equivalent of the sum of money that could now transform outcomes for Scottish taxpayers. All this freeing up further funds for the frontline.

So will this now minority SNP government change course and earn the broad support of Parliament? The signs are not good. At First Minister's Questions, when asked if he thought the country needed to be set in a new direction, John Swinney directly and loudly said "no". The conduct of his government in the run up to the most consequential UK Budget in fifteen years was also more of the same fiscal incompetence. The SNP's demands amounted to an entirely unfunded, and frankly unfathomable, £70 billion, all while opposing every measure to raise revenue. Everyone other than John Swinney remembers that Liz Truss crashed the UK economy on a mere £45 billion of unfunded expenditure. The SNP's approach to public money would make Liz Truss blush.

It is time to get serious.

When spending the largest ever funding available to the devolved government the SNP must be judged on outcomes – NHS waiting times, the performance of our education system in international league tables, the number of houses built.

At present, on all those measures, the SNP is failing Scotland: 1 in 6 Scots on an NHS waiting list; Scottish pupils a full year behind their English counterparts in Mathematics; and a housing emergency declared across Scotland.

Following the Budget, this SNP Government now has the means.

We must now judge them by what they achieve.

Michael Marra is the Shadow Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Scottish Labour MSP for North East Scotland

Planning Reform Can Unleash Economic Renewal - Rob McDonald

Originally posted 29 November 2024

After the uncertainty and political turbulence in the UK of recent years, it may be that we have entered a somewhat calmer period, domestically if not internationally.

I certainly hope so, in which case it is vital that we use this time to get to grips with some of the fundamental challenges that can put the Scottish and British economies on a path to higher growth, and that we do it right. A faster-growing economy means a virtuous cycle of more buoyant tax revenues, which in turn help to support well-funded public services.

The good news is that we can surely build a consensus that this is where we want to get to as a country. It should also be helpful that much of the means of getting there – while critically important – is also relatively mundane, and therefore needn't degenerate into the kind of polarised rows we have seen over some other issues in recent years.
Top of the list for me is planning reform. If people find it hard to get excited about what can be a dry subject, I hope we can all be enthused about what it can unlock: a greater pace and flow of investment, the building of infrastructure that the country needs, work for local supply chains, a favourable business environment that attracts inward investors, including in manufacturing – all ultimately supporting good-quality jobs.

For electricity infrastructure, reform of the planning system is essential if we are to achieve security of energy supply and deliver on our clean power and net zero targets in Scotland and across the UK.

SSEN Transmission owns, operates and develops the high-voltage electricity transmission system in the north of Scotland – the pylons, overhead lines, subsea cabling and underground routing that move power from where the renewable resources are to the towns, cities and villages where the demand is. As a business, we are investing over £20bn this decade to deliver grid infrastructure investment that will unlock targets for a clean power system by 2030, strengthen energy security and support the pathway to a net zero economy.

The existing consenting regime in Scotland is well past its sell-by date, and now presents the biggest risk to the delivery of this programme. Reform is crucial if a decarbonised electricity system by the end of the decade is to be met.

Therefore, the UK Government's recent publication of a consultation on Scottish consenting reform for electricity infrastructure was extremely welcome. It will inform the approach of the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero (DESNZ) to the forthcoming Planning and Infrastructure Bill, which is viewed as the appropriate legislative vehicle to make amendments to the Electricity Act 1989 for the purpose of streamlining and making the consenting process more efficient.

An equally welcome development is that this consultation is in effect a joint initiative of the UK and Scottish governments, with the two administrations working 'as one' in this area. Business isn't slow to criticise politicians when we think (fairly or unfairly) that they are indulging in petty point-scoring. We should be just as quick to offer praise when we see them working pragmatically and enthusiastically on shared interests, across party and constitutional divides. I'm an optimist, and hope it's a sign of things to come more generally.

By way of explaining why we need joint working between Holyrood and Westminster to reform planning, transmission projects are developed based on evidence of need, as recommended by the National Energy System Operator (NESO) and independently assessed by the regulator, Ofgem.

They are developed in line with established UK and Scottish government legislation, including community consultation, environmental policies, Scotland's National Planning Framework (NPF4), and legal obligations of our operating license.

Overhead lines in Scotland are consented through the Section 37 consents process, which is governed by Westminster's Electricity Act. Although energy is largely reserved to the UK Government, the role of consenting S37 projects falls under the devolved responsibility of the Scottish Government's Energy Consents Unit (ECU), with Local Planning Authorities being statutory consultees along with other relevant bodies and community groups.

The prize of planning reform is a robust, timely and proportionate process, which meaningfully involves local communities.

Planning delays for electricity transmission projects are in no-one's interests, not least because of the uncertainty caused to communities, and also for the sake of local jobs and investment, and of course the delivery of critical national infrastructure.

We recognise the importance of effective community liaison, and have a track record of going beyond what is required for public consultation and taking on board alternative suggestions for overhead lines and substation locations.

A centrepiece of reform should be that determination periods are timebound to 12 months, in line with commitments made by the Scottish Government in its Green Industrial Strategy, whether or not a Public Local Inquiry (PLI) is instituted. And as a confidence-building measure, this ought to be underpinned by legislation. At present, there is no legally binding timeframe for the latest point at which a decision on consent applications can be expected.

As currently drafted, Section 37 of the Electricity Act 1989 means that a Public Local Inquiry is automatically triggered if the local planning authority committee objects to a project, even if it complies with Scottish planning policy and is recommended to receive consent by the local planning authority's own planning officer. This results in lengthy, resource-intensive and costly PLIs in cases where the final determination is in little or no doubt. For the sake of consistency, it would be sensible for this automaticity to be

removed from the process, and for a decision on whether or not a transmission project should go to a PLI to sit with the Scottish Ministers.

In the case of the Beauly-Denny transmission project, it took nearly four-and-a-half years for consent to be granted, and the problem of delay has continued elsewhere.
By marketing the nation as a good place to do business, Scotland can be a magnet for green jobs and investment to transmit our vast wind and other renewable energy resources. The construction of Sumitomo Electric's state-of-the-art subsea transmission cable factory at Nigg is testament to the scale of our opportunity. Planning reform can power the way.

Rob McDonald is Managing Director of SSEN Transmission.

Improving Local Democracy in Scotland - Parliament or Council? - 25 years of evidence

- Bill Howat

Originally posted 3 December 2024

The main aim of the Mercat Group is to promote and improve local democracy. We argue this can best be achieved by ensuring decisions on the delivery of public services are taken at the lowest local level consistent with democratic and financial accountability. Our aim is very similar to that set out for the Scottish Parliament over 25 years ago in the heady days of the 'Devolution Project'. Power was to be devolved not just from Westminster to Edinburgh but beyond to councils and communities throughout Scotland. The sensitivities around that aim were highlighted by the political storm around the suggestion that the new Parliament would be no different from a Council.

25 years on we can now form a view on how the Devolution Project is delivering for local democracy. The Council comparison may have been inappropriate, inept or mis-judged, but the implicit question about the relationship between the Parliament and Scotland's councils and local communities remains valid.

Put another way; has the Scottish Parliament become Scotland's largest council?

High Hopes and Ambitions

The Scottish Parliament opened on 1 July 1999. The high hopes and ambitions of its founders were that it would be:
- modern; a single chamber
- streamlined; powerful committees
- consensual; less adversarial politics
- community focussed; able to connect to ordinary people,
- innovative across a wide range of public services, and
- **strategic; power was to be devolved**.

The last point was highlighted in the rhetoric of the Parliamentary Debates and especially in the speeches at the official Opening. Devolution was a project that would continue. Power would flow from Westminster to Holyrood and then onwards and outwards to the communities of Scotland. In short, nothing like a council!

Reality – Rhetoric meets Evidence

We now have a growing body of evidence on which to judge the progress of 'The Devolution Project'. The Mercat Group and Reform Scotland separately submitted their views of the evidence to the Local Government, Housing & Planning Committee of the Scottish Parliament as part of the pre-budget scrutiny. We also shared an evidence session where, with Prof David Heald, we presented a unified view what the evidence tells us. The Official Report of that session can be read here.

Any reasonable, rational review of that evidence could only conclude that it has not been a success in terms of devolving power beyond Edinburgh. In fact, all the evidence points

to growing centralisation of power in Holyrood. That is not good for local democracy, nor does it seem like good Governance.

A major part of the problem is what our late colleague Douglas Sinclair (when CEO of Cosla) termed the 'spaghetti of boundaries' of public service delivery agencies that have largely been imposed by the Scottish Parliament. His term was used by John Swinney in 2007 when, as Cabinet Secretary for Finance, he published the independent review of Scottish Executive budgets (the Howat Report). He said;

"*The report highlights that Scotland has a crowded public sector landscape. This is causing duplication and lack of focus. In recent years, an organisational spaghetti of partnerships and networks has grown, alongside a hugely complex system of performance and monitoring*."

He promised a simpler, smaller government that would 'declutter this landscape".

Some changes were made to reduce numbers, although centralising Police and Fire & Rescue services to two new Quangos eliminated the historic local accountability of the emergency services. Other changes added new bodies and further extended the 'organisational spaghetti'. They also made the task of co-ordinating policy much more complex. In fact, all changes post Howat have centralised power, functions and resources. We are still waiting for evidence of 'declutter'.

The latest example of this centripetal trend is to centralise social care services into a new body that will effectively be part of Scotland's biggest quango – the NHS - a proposal that is opposed by the NHS Trades Unions, COSLA and the Green Party.

Is this what the Constitutional Convention fought for prior to the creation of the Scottish Parliament? Did they want to see the Scottish Parliament aspire to be Scotland's largest council?

What Now?

We argue there is a need to revisit and reset the way all public services in Scotland are organised, delivered and financed. We have suggested the creation of a Scottish Civic Convention to take forward the public conversation necessary to conduct such a review. There may be other options but the central aim should be to develop a transition plan to ensure decisions on the delivery of all public services are taken at the lowest local level consistent with democratic and financial accountability.

2024 is the 25th anniversary of the creation of the Scottish Parliament. 2025 is the 50th anniversary of the reorganisation of Scottish councils based the Wheatley Report and the creation of Cosla. The new UK government is proposing changes to local governance in England to devolve substantial new powers to the English regions, Metropolitan Mayors and Councils. Whilst the powers and responsibilities of Scotland's 100+ quangos that have no local democratic accountability have expanded under the banner of devolution.

Changes over the last 50 years mean Scottish Local Government is in danger of

becoming the delivery arm of central Government. Some would argue we have already reached that position.

Put another way, councils will become the local administration for Scottish Government policies, contrary to the two most basic principles set out in the Wheatley Report that local government

".. exists to supply public services. These may be national services which have to be administered locally, or they may be services of a purely local character. The distinction is rarely clear cut, and we would prefer to put it that local government exists to provide services locally, on such scale and of such character as the nature of each service requires.

Secondly, it exists to provide local government. This means that services are in a real sense locally controlled. There must be an element of choice exercisable locally. More than that, it is implicit that local authorities should in some degree provide a means for self-expression of local communities."

This is an opportune time for Scotland to revisit our governance systems ahead of the next SP elections. The Scottish Parliament needs to become the Strategic force it set out to be. That means following through on the Devolution Project by transferring powers and responsibilities to the lowest level where communities can feel engaged in and responsible for their public services.

In short, it's time to 'sort out the spaghetti.'

The article is by Bill Howat on behalf of the Mercat Group. Bill Howat is a former Chief Executive of Comhairle Nan Eilean Siar

Wha's like us? - Scottish culture on the reopening of Notre Dame

- Neil Gilmour

Originally posted 8 December 2024

On the day that Notre Dame Cathedral reopens five years after a devastating fire, our finest building, the Mackintosh School of Art, still lies in ruins. Unlike Notre Dame, the Mack is a sad tale of political disinterest and project missteps. This mirrors the wider disregard for Mackintosh's legacy and the fabric of Glasgow more generally. Is it only Edinburgh that really matters amongst our threadbare cultural priorities?

"The fire at Notre Dame reminds us that our history never stops and we will always have challenges to overcome. We will rebuild Notre Dame, more beautiful than before – and I want it done in the next five years. We can do it. After the time of testing comes a time of reflection and then of action."

Emmanuel Macron 16 April 2019

"Most people in Glasgow weren't that bothered. After a few days of constant talk of the fire, its implications and whether the damage was permanent or could be salvaged, some (myself included) began to get irritated by what felt like the disproportionate coverage. Many of us were offended at the amount of time dedicated to this story, not just because we had no real interest in contemporary art, but because we grew up in communities where things burn down all the time."

Darren McGarvey, Poverty Safari, Luath Press, 2017 (writing about the first Mackintosh Art School fire in 2014)

"The fire has been a devastating blaze, much worse than the one that took hold of the Mackintosh building four years ago. The damage is severe and extensive. My heart goes out to everybody associated with the art school."

Nicola Sturgeon 16 June 2018

It is incredibly difficult to be objective about art and architecture. Not least "what matters". To whom? And why? What has worth? Aesthetically? As an icon? Nevertheless, the diametrically different fates of Notre Dame and Glasgow's Mackintosh School of Art building post-catastrophic fires are remarkable.

In France the fire was a national tragedy. Unlimited resources and energy were promised to restore it fully within 5 years. A five-star general and a powerful task force were appointed to ensure this restoration occurred successfully. Over £580m was raised (and spent). And today that glorious effort bears' fruit. The iconic beautiful cathedral has risen from the ashes.

In Scotland, after two fires, the Mackintosh building lies in ruins, the surrounding area largely devastated. Procurement processes failed. Investigations dragged on. Insurance claim and counterclaim clutter the project. Glasgow School of Art (GSA) project leadership is secretive and wholly unimpressive. At Holyrood and Westminster level this is neither a national tragedy nor a restoration priority. It is unclear whether this

ruin will ever be restored, and the longer this situation persists the more likely it will not. Despite all protestations to the contrary, GSA can function without the Mack. Hundreds of graduates now have no connection whatsoever with the building. And, as Darren McGarvey claims, Glasgow can survive without it, as many Glaswegians have bigger issues to deal with.

This is a tragic outcome for "Britain's favourite building in the last 175 years" (2009 RIBA poll winner). The pinnacle achievement of Scotland's finest architect, and our most internationally recognised and valued building. And the contrast with Notre Dame is shocking.

First, a few numbers. Paris has roughly three times the population of Glasgow. Paris gets 50 million tourists annually, of which 20 million visit Notre Dame. Glasgow gets around 3 million overnight visitors, of whom one third visited Mackintosh sites. Paris GDP is estimated at £210bn. Glasgow GDP is one eight of this.

So, Paris is bigger. Wealthier. More popular with tourists, especially Notre Dame. A national capital. The French arts budget is £3.4bn.

Glasgow is smaller. Poorer. Less popular with tourists. The Scottish arts budget is only £60m. Mack restoration is estimated at a further £100m (having spent over £30m after the 2014 fire).

So maybe this is all inevitable…Notre Dame rises in five years like a magnificent phoenix from the ashes as the beating heart of a great city. The Mack lies in ruins, perhaps for ever, in an impoverished and disinterested Glasgow. Macron nails his colours to the mast on day one. Our First Ministers wring their hands and…well that's it really…

From day one, standing amidst the horrifying stinking Mac ruins, Nicola Sturgeon's words set the tone for the miserable path the building is on. No commitment to action. No acknowledgement of the keystone role the building played in Glasgow and Scottish cultural life. Nothing on our international standing. And subsequently…no 5-star general or world-class taskforce. No "big tent" approach to tackle the impact on community and fabric. We chose a different path. Wee. Parochial. Unprofessional. Secretive. Glacially slow.

The Scottish Nationalist movement has repeatedly used the "too wee, too poor, too stupid" phrase to illustrate how Unionists denigrate Scotland's capacity to run its own affairs. Ironically it is a quote from John Swinney, who said in 2001 "*They are terrified of the idea that the lives of millions of Scots would be improved if control of Scottish resources were in Scottish hands, and that is why they will always run down the Scots – why they will always say we are too stupid and too poor to be trusted to run the affairs of our own country*".

So, are successive Scottish First Ministers or Governments "too wee, too poor and too disinterested" when it comes to the Mack? Is that why Mackintosh's wider legacy in Glasgow is neglected, ruined or sold off? Maybe the money could be better spent

elsewhere? Maybe we do not deserve better? Nor care? Maybe the million plus visitors would be better off in Edinburgh? Or looking at castles in the Highlands?

We have been here before. In 1933 architect Robert Hurd reviewing the Charles Rennie Mackintosh memorial exhibition wrote: "*It is an unfortunate fact that even the educated Scotsman does not seem to realise the international importance of Mackintosh as an architect*".

I agree with some of Darren McGarvey's writing about poverty and class. In the same way as much of Irvine Welsh's view of working-class Edinburgh resonated in the '90's. But the disparity in our care for Edinburgh versus Glasgow is completely jarring. The capital has National museums, collections and strategic infrastructure (not least the £1.25bn tram network). Glasgow has local museums, collections and largely shabby infrastructure (excepting the £300m on the decade long Underground modernisation).

In Edinburgh the King's Theatre is undergoing a major renovation (£35m). The Old Royal High School will be transformed into a National Centre for Music (£68m). The construction of a 1000 seat classical venue, the Dunard Centre is nearing completion (£110m). A potential 8500 seat venue is planned for Edinburgh Park (£80m). A new National Galleries of Scotland conservation and community space is to be built in Granton (£9m). Renovation of Edinburgh Filmhouse is almost finished (£2m). The new Scottish galleries at the National Gallery of Scotland are recently opened (£39m).

It looks like those of us living in Edinburgh (some 550 000) or visiting (around 4 million/year) are luckier than those wee, poor, disinterested Glaswegians…down the back of the Holyrood and Westminster and Edinburgh and private sofas we've been fortunate enough to find some £340m (and counting). What luck!

Scottish creative and cultural sectors annually contribute more than £5 billion to the economy, employing more than 150,000 people. Scotland's creative practitioners are world-renown, producing internationally recognised work known for innovating, pushing boundaries and challenging conventions. Glasgow is *the* centre of this. And at its heart was the Mack and the wider Mackintosh legacy. At the very core of why Glasgow matters…nationally and internationally.

But is this us now? Milquetoast leadership in the face of the big challenges? An inexorable drift into shabby mediocrity for our largest city? A careless disregard for our cultural fabric, irrespective of the impact of decay? One favoured city largely growing and thriving, while the rest do not? Scotland splintered on class grounds with the disenfranchised abandoned while the "liberal elite" make hay?

This is what too wee, too poor, too stupid looks like. We can always reach for something else to blame. To justify our behaviour. The English. Westminster. The Unionists. Brexit. But it would be better if we took a long hard honest look at ourselves first. When we stand in our own ruins wringing our hands. When we leave most of the 5.5 million, and especially the working class, out of any plans or solutions or the opportunity to work together to build a better Scotland. When we hide behind bureaucratic process or doublespeak.

We, the Scots people, did not ask for this. We do not mandate this. We expect so much better. For all of us. We look at Notre Dame today and wonder “why not us?”.

Neil Gilmour is a former energy industry senior executive recently returned to Scotland having led numerous successful world-scale projects.