

# The Conformist Imagination: Think-Tankery Versus Utopian Scotland

## Alex Law

G. Hassan, E. Gibb and L. Howland, eds., *Scotland 2020: Hopeful Stories for a Northern Nation*, London: Demos.

### Two Wrongs Make a Right

Something is wrong with Scotland. Or, rather, ‘Scotlands’. According to Demos there are three of these: ‘Traditional Scotland’, ‘Modernist Scotland’ and ‘Hopeful Scotland’. Two of these Scotlands, ‘Traditional’ and ‘Modernist’, are simply played out. Only ‘Hopeful’ Scotland can carry the future aspirations of the nation.

Demos’s projections in *Scotland 2020* are just the latest entreaties by Approved Thinkers for Scots to get over their outdated ‘hopeless’ styles and start taking up a style more in keeping with that of a ‘hopeful’ nation. A whole series of calls have been made recently for Scots to be more positive, happy, playful, optimistic and now hopeful.

Stuart Cosgrove, Channel 4’s Director of Nations and Regions and lad’s lad, caused a furore when he claimed that Scots love ‘failure’ and writers like James Kelman and film-makers like Peter Mullan are obsessed by the ‘self-loathing’ of depressing urban realism: ‘They also love the culture of poverty. The rise of the Scottish Socialist Party is a case in point. They don’t seem to be able to imagine themselves out of this culture’.<sup>1</sup>

Christopher Harvie, the historian, and the popular writer, Alexander McColl Smith have both criticised the national standing of Irvine Welsh’s ‘debased’ fiction. Harvie is specific about the class-basis of this: ‘Welsh’s market remains captive: the inarticulate 20-somethings, call-centre folk, cyberserfs, unsmug unmarrieds who infest [city centre] fun palaces. Welsh is to this lot what, in his happier days, Jeffrey Archer was to Mondeo Man: the jammy bastard who did well’.<sup>2</sup>

Meanwhile the former head of literature at the Scottish Arts Council, Jenny Brown, bemoans the absence of commercial, upbeat writing – ‘the gorgeous sexy novels’ – swamped by dark, Scots miserabilism.<sup>3</sup>

### The Fearties of Neo-Liberalism

Fatalism and pessimism are supposedly endemic to the national culture. This has been argued with most crusading zeal by Carol Craig, the California-style happiness guru. Craig argues that Scots suffer from a collective psychological crisis of confidence that results in a self-disciplining culture which places a check on personal ambition and market success.<sup>4</sup> What is needed to break from this torpor is the power of positive thinking, happiness and a can-do mentality. So successful has Craig’s campaign for positive thinking been that £750,000 of public and private funding has been awarded to set a Centre for Confidence and Wellbeing.

The main assumption behind all this is the assertion that Scotland suffers from an inferiority complex deeply rooted in the ‘national psyche’. This is seen as a debilitating,

congenital condition afflicting Scotland to the point where the nation constantly under-competes in the world economy. If only our latent pessimism and negativity could be overcome then somehow we might become a great wee country again.

Here can be found echoes of an older argument that Scots are a great disappointment as a nation for failing to live up to their historical mission of achieving full national self-determination. Such claims traditionally came from nationalist intellectuals and politicians frustrated by the lack of political support amongst Scots for the break-up of the UK state.

The moral failing of Scots to develop a fully-fledged national politics and culture reflects their deeply-embedded ‘inferiorism’ borne out of dependency relations on the metropolitan heartlands of England, where social power really resides.

This has been largely superseded in the past decade by a new rhetoric of social and cultural exclusion as a way to remoralise despondent social groups in Scotland. A kind of ‘Munchhausen effect’ is routinely invoked where individuals need to pull themselves and their communities out of the mire by their own efforts.

This chimes especially well with neo-liberalism’s drive to create cultures and identities around an entrepreneurial selfhood receptive to the force and needs of capital. As Alan Hogarth for CBI Scotland put it: ‘We have to try and get over the cultural problem of still denigrating success and an anti-private sector, anti-profit culture still apparent across Scotland’.<sup>5</sup>

All this has a certain ideological consistency to it. The social source of this in Scotland today is a new power elite whose shared project is to make Scotland a miniaturised version of the global neo-liberal order.

Arguably, this project expresses the revanchism of the new power elite that has increasingly ensnared Scotland since the Parliamentary restoration of a few years ago. For too long the middle class leaders of society – culture experts, union bureaucrats, academics, journalists, political hacks, public servants, non-governmental bodies – suffered the indignities of being treated as irrelevant under Thatcherism and multinational restructuring.<sup>6</sup>

All this time they saw themselves as a new power elite in waiting. Some among them set-up a Constitutional Convention, an undemocratic elite that gathered together to demand democracy on behalf of the rest of the nation.

Having restored a quasi-sovereign Parliament, such elites have glued themselves to the institutions around the ‘New Scotland’. They’d like to forget the recent past and their abject failure to protect Scottish society from the ravages of Thatcherism, which, of course, many have since come to see as unassailable common sense.

Given that the present is not all it was once cracked up to be, something for which the elites can no longer be held responsible, they have

become heroic defenders of the future. If only the rest of us would snap out of being depressed about past defeats and an unheroic present.

### Hopeful Hopelessness

How does the new power elite revanchism express itself? In place of social solidarity rooted in the inequities and antagonisms of adversarial class relations, any sense of the good community depends today on media lifestyle drives and political exhortations to develop our own ‘social capital’. Television and the press are unrelenting in their lifestyle campaigns for us to dress better, eat better, cook better, garden better, shop better, even shit better. On the other hand, a conformist sense of community obligation, trust and networks is demanded of those sections of society worst hit by decades of capital restructuring and state reform by joining choirs, painting clubs or the PTA, what is called ‘social capital’.<sup>7</sup>

Squeezed between two types of middle class conformism – emanating from the people who as a matter of social distinction always know better about tasteful consumption and responsible morality – the rest suffer their admonitions and are treated as ungrateful supplicants of their beneficence. This may feel like hopelessness most of the time.

But there are also the mad moments of breakout, when subaltern recalcitrance is moved to outright rebellion, for instance to resist the ‘modernising’ measures of the new power elite in the closure of a local swimming pool in Govanhill,<sup>8</sup> the Stock Housing Transfer in Glasgow or phone masts and GM crop trials in North-East Fife.<sup>9</sup>

Recalcitrance therefore is posed as a problem to be stamped out. A discernible ideological drive is underway in Scotland to see to it that there is less of this defeatist nonsense. It only gets in the way of those selfless creatures that valiantly try to make a difference.

Class conflict and cultures are polarising, adversarial and unpleasant. They divide nations like Scotland that need to be held together to entice capital to settle here, if only for a moment, by cultural pluralism, a pleasant disposition and harmless historical monuments. Otherwise, ferocious global market competition will jeopardise lifestyle, acquisitions and the social cohesion that are enjoyed by affluent sections of society.

In its social and economic structure Scotland has undergone what for some is a profound transformation in just two decades from industrial basket-case to post-industrial powerhouse. Only popular attitudes have been slow to catch-up. Sociologists point to the fact that Scotland is now a more affluent, comfortable and pleasant place to live, although an impoverished minority are being cut out of the good times.<sup>10</sup>

Middle class leaders of society therefore need to become more assertive about the joy of commodities and competition and break from the thrall in which many are supposedly held of

proletarian recalcitrance and its legacies, above all, the welfare state and collectivist values.

## Remarkable Thinkers

How is ideological revanchism given shape? New power elite revenge for past humiliations and current banalities takes the form of a plague on both the houses of the left and the right. Abjuring both proletarian recalcitrance and reactionary petit bourgeois traditions, the enlightened elites seek to lead society under the illumination of their own pragmatic vision. An ahistorical, self-contented Third Way, unfettered by the ideological detritus of the past, is to be steered between these unspeakable binaries.

At the helm of the great pragmatic leap forward is think-tankery. Since ideology and class interests are too depressingly backward-looking the vacuum in ideas is filled eclectically by commercial thinkers for hire. Such thinkers hover around the margins of the power elite, hustling for the right rate of exchange for the next Big Idea. Operating beyond the managerialism of conventional academe, think tanks parade the illusion that they are 'independent', free to think radically, outside of the unappetising conventions of peer-reviewed papers and RAEs or party-based research groups.

But, as Walter Benjamin remarked of an earlier faux intelligentsia, they thought that they came to the market to coolly observe but, in reality, they only came to find a buyer. For 'centre-left' think tanks the uncertainty of their own social standing and economic position translates into the ambiguity of their political function.

For instance, after he gave up the security of working as a *Financial Times* journalist to become a thinker of independent means<sup>11</sup>, former Blair guru Charles Leadbeater is all wind and thunder about the social, technical and economic revolution of our age in his idealist paean to the weightless 'knowledge economy', *Living on Thin Air*. He makes great play of his own ability to literally live by his wits and find a buyer in the market place. We are all encouraged to emulate such examples of the self-sufficient but networked monad and bring our own carcasses to market willingly.

While the policy-apparatus talks about 'evidence-based' studies and research institutes slowly grind out the findings of longitudinal, representative studies, think tanks need to catch the eye with the newly-minted neologism, the grandiose claim, and the fundamental re-think. Think-tankery demands novel jargon (iconoclastic) to dress up (re-brand) stale ideas (new, radical), outlandish cults (positive thinking), inflated claims (the knowledge economy) or outright banalities (ideas shape society). But always in such a way that no threat might be implied to their existing or potential position in the marketplace for ideas.

And the traffic runs in both directions. So-

called action research routinely supplies the buyer with the right tune, one already composed by stringing together over-wrought corporate slogans about flexibility, connectivity, networks, social capital, social inclusion, knowledge, information, and so on.

Think tanks and policy centres revel in 'a vision of progress', 'thinking the unthinkable', 'bringing radical solutions to old problems', finding a 'future that works'.<sup>12</sup> All of which must be heroically undertaken by 'intellectuals, thinkers and ideas-orientated people in the sphere of public policy and politics'.<sup>13</sup> In other words, people just like themselves.

And this is no easy matter. It involves risk-taking and courage 'in a world without the old certainties and easy distinctions of class politics and confrontation'.<sup>14</sup> Commercial thinkers have, not for the first or the last time, done away with all this unpleasant business of class. Good news about the end of class finds an insatiable appetite among elites that always stand above the fray in 'the general interest'.

## Demos and Polis

One of the most influential, media-obsessed, anti-class think tanks under New Labour is Demos. They have all the attributes of post-modern think-tankery at its most superficial. As two sober academics put it, Demos show few inhibitions about shunning painstaking, detailed research in favour of ' cursory surveys of focus-group opinion on "life-style" issues such as gender and the environment: like the [Blair-endorsed, right-wing] Adam Smith Institute, it threw out ideas almost at random in the hope that they would be rewarded by a newspaper headline or a semi-humorous item in television bulletins'.<sup>15</sup>

Their own self-image, 'About Demos', says it all: 'Demos is a greenhouse for new ideas', which 'cross-fertilise ideas and experience' of 'people changing politics'. Key to this is something called 'Demos knowledge', which seems to concern 'the way ideas shape society'. Well, yes, and...?

Such vacuous phrase-mongering has its roots in the defeats faced by the organised working class in the 1980s. Demos was set up by two former members of the Communist Party of Great Britain, Martin Jacques and Geoff Mulgan. During the 1980s they increasingly celebrated Thatcherism, the market and consumer capitalism and traduced the labour movement in the Communist Party's own magazine, *Marxism Today*.

Such was their enthusiasm for Thatcherism that key right-wingers like Douglas Hurd and Alfred Sherman supported Demos, despite its stated claim to have moved 'beyond right and left'. Interestingly, neither Sherman nor Hurd relinquished their own class politics on subscribing to Demos.

Since then Blair, an incorrigible think-tanker, has become a Demos enthusiast, adopting their

lamentable attempt to 're-brand' antiquated Britain as 'cool Britannia' and preparing the ground for the centrist shibboleths of the Third Way. At least Mulgan found the ultimate buyer for his ideological re-heats when he was recruited as personal adviser to Blair.

## A heroic leap into the future

Demos's *Scotland 2020* is the merely the latest (2005) exercise in thinking really deeply about the future. Some of the same characters have been punting the future since the late '90s in collections like *A Different Future: A Moderniser's Guide to Scotland* (1999) and *Tomorrow's Scotland* (2002). In these works the accent was on how the new Parliament would shape up as a 'modernising', that is, centrist institution. While it may still be early days, the results have been disappointing, evidenced by the mass disinterest in the elections to only the second Scottish Parliament.

*Scotland 2020* has a bit less to say about politics and the Parliament and a lot more to say about changing the mythical stories that the nation lives by and will adopt in the future. The problem is that the narratives dominant in Scotland are too old-fashionedly collectivist and egalitarian. This has bred a deep-seated pessimism that has degenerated since the Parliamentary restoration into outright 'fatalism'.

Stories are needed that will excite and enthuse Scots to claim their share of the new opportunities being opened-up by neo-liberal capitalism. Key to this is something called 'futures literacy', another fine piece of think-tankery. Here a linear sequence is envisaged 'to move from consideration of a set of possibilities, to agreement on a set of more probable scenarios, to a consensus around a preferable future'.<sup>16</sup>

Were it not so fatuous this might be considered ironic coming, as it does, from a think-tank obsessed with the momentary impression, basking in nothing much deeper than media image and elite-influence in the present.

In Scotland, this simply means that 'people' need to start telling each other stories that are more optimistic and hopeful and stop depressing each other with tales of poverty, urban blight, collectivism and the loss of distinctively Scottish values. But maybe this is too charitable given Demos's own account of 'futures literacy', which I quote in its full evasive and tautological glory:

A futures literate public would embrace the capacity to think and talk about the future, using a new language and grammar of politics. Developing a futures literate culture would be one that recognised that thinking about the future means embracing a world where there is uncertainty and unpredictability, and where there are many futures and many future Scotlands.<sup>17</sup>

Never mind 'futures literacy'. What about some

basic logical consistency? On the one hand, it is stated that 'people relate national policies to their own experience' but a few lines later we learn that 'it is quite common for people to *never* make the link between their own experience and national policy'.<sup>18</sup>

But hold on. Isn't a future enveloped by neo-liberalism and New Labour as predictable as economic slump follows boom, where poverty and the reserve army of labour is a permanent side-effect of capital accumulation, and where the world system of states guarantee global levels of violence? So long as all this persist, it is certain that there will not be infinitely happy futures to pass through.

### The Three Scotland's

Three straw models of Scotland are invented by Demos. First, a *traditional* Scotland from Old Labour to the Catholic church hankers after the 'old certainties' of conservative values as a way to resist 'encroachment of the modern world'. This is given short shrift. Second, a *modernist* Scotland of the official government apparatus evinces a top-down market growth machine, optimistically predicated on a technocratic, soulless, linear vision that ultimately lacks 'hope'. Economic growth alone will bring happiness and contentment.

And then, of course, there is the correct Demos-world of a *hopeful* Scotland based on 'learned optimism'. This has less of the wild optimism than the modernist gung-ho embrace of neo-liberal capitalism. It works with people inside and outside of the growth machine to embrace 'hope, deep change and complexity' to effect systemic transformation.<sup>19</sup>

For all their constant chuntering about 'complexity' Demos issue disclaimers that these vague models are necessary simplifications that merely 'illustrate the key faultlines and tensions in Scotland, its cultures and institutions'. Beyond vague allusions to Old Labour and the Catholic Church, none of these 'faultlines' are delineated with any empirical precision. But that is the beauty of shifting the focus away from the intractable problems of politics and economy to vague narratives of hope, happiness and confidence. You can sound radical and still not offend the future buyers of ideas.

What an edifice of cultural transformation to build on such flimsy foundations! It smacks of putting a human face on neo-liberalism. This is the well-known trick of applying culture to issues that really require critical political economy and the mobilisation of dissent. Instead, a fatalistic culture in the form of story-telling and myth-making is made to blame for obdurate levels of inequality and poverty in Scotland. In the process the structures of capitalism conveniently drop out of the equation.

### Declass ed Scotland

That Scottish society has changed fundamentally is becoming something of a mantra where everything is 'new'. A new 'ethic of living' is needed to match the changed reality of a more individualist, plural and complex society. But, the central problem for elites is that despite the 'upward mobility' into professional and managerial 'classes' many Scots identify themselves even more strongly with being working class than they did a quarter of a century ago.

Measuring class is a notoriously flawed business, where the conventional categories often fail to reflect reality. Diverse groups of workers are lumped together as non-manual for instance and then their attributes are read back as somehow less working class than the manual worker ideal.

Much of the change to class structure amounts to a shift to feminised service work instead of male-dominated manufacturing. Yet huge swathes of service work are proletarianised in the double sense of hierarchically-controlled, repetitive operations, typified by fast food joints and call centres, but also by much of the public sector where trade unionism remains entrenched – dismissed by Demos as 'a minority pastime of tenured public sector professionals' – and the low



Scottish Enterprise



Clydesdale Bank

waged nature of such work.

Demos describe the 'profound consequences' of how the lives of Scots have been 'transformed' thus:

from the social layout and feel of cities, to the way young people think about their aspirations, future prospects and savings patterns, to newspaper supplements and TV programmes on this related domestic revolution, and the number of DIY and garden centres.<sup>20</sup>

Like so much else, for each of these assertions it would be relatively straightforward to draw exactly contrary conclusions.

Cities are being cloned by retail and development capital as city-centres are turned into hostile surveillance zones.<sup>21</sup> Young people are being burdened with record levels of personal debt not savings. Lifestyle cultures are merely the latest form of reproduction that capital takes as a self-expanding system. Capitalism is commodifying the deepest recesses of everyday life.

Even Scotland's poorest city, Dundee, gets the Demos boosterism treatment, particularly interesting for me as someone who lives and works there. This is set in the context of the shift from Fordism to 'mass personalisation' but little detailed analysis of the city or its composition is provided. Instead a recipe is handed to Dundee, with its 'jazz scene' (?) and science research centres, based on rhetoric about attracting and nurturing 'creative talent' appropriate to the 'creative age'. To do this requires 'new forms of social trust' and avoiding copying how other cities promote themselves. The most concrete recommendation made was the following insight: 'The competitive advantage of Dundee could be marshalled around ideas such as "the best place in Scotland to bring up a child", or "a great place for baby boomers to grow old"'.<sup>22</sup>

### Happy Stories?

So new positive stories about the New Progressive Scotland are needed for these newly affluent and always more complex times. This story 'emphasises health, well-being, status, self-worth and other subjective indicators'.<sup>23</sup> Again, Demos are keen to shed the attachment of too many Scots to outdated social democratic values. Here Scots are cast as too consensual, reticent and fearful of dissent, making genuine dialogue particularly difficult. Yet it is Demos themselves that can't make their mind up if dialogue should be consensual or disputatious.

Story-telling is advocated because it creates self-understanding and a 'feeling of belonging and security'.<sup>24</sup> Recent rhetorical psychology has demonstrated that thinking and self-understanding arise dialogically through argument, debate, dispute and dissent rather than agreement, consent, and conformism.<sup>25</sup> Anyway, what happened to the idea that far from being passively conformist Scots tend to be democratically *caraptious*,<sup>26</sup> always ready for an argument at the drop of a hat? Demos fall into the trap of imputing essential psycho-cultural characteristics to an entire nation. So much for complexity.

### Mind Your Language

Perhaps the most insightful part of this

collection is the short story section. As with most other non-Demos contributors these do not display the same confidence in Demos's optimism of the intellect. Ken McLeod, the acclaimed writer of anarcho-Trotskyist science fiction, for instance, provides a typically bleak, quasi-Orwellian scenario for Scotland of endless war and environmental catastrophe.

Another novelist, Ruaridh Nicoll, tells a more familiar story about a disability benefit inspector. Nicoll also reported his experience of the actual seminars; Demos's accent on 'hopeful stories' gave a 'slightly rose-tinted view of the proceedings'.<sup>27</sup>

Anne Donovan's short story shows a time when urban Scots is flattened out of existence by Standard English through cultural indifference, highly unlikely but a useful contrast to Demos bland-speak. She points to the wider issue of spoken Scots as a marker of class that, as Tom Leonard among others have shown, is a recalcitrant form of speech which became by default a touchstone of national authenticity under Thatcherism, much to the chagrin of the indistinct vowels of middle class Scotland.<sup>28</sup>

Demos's own use of degraded think-tank jargon and corporate-speak might be taken as a case in point here. Such clichéd language litters the Demos contributions: talk about 'personalisation', 'futures literacy', 'the creative clusters' and so on.

It must be catching. Even non-Demos contributions fall into unthinking Demos-speak, as in the discussion about tourism and history, which reduces notions of 'self-actualisation' and 'authenticity' to simply providing holidays based on the hobbies and interests of visitors, apparently unaware of the tortured careers of such concepts in the Modernist revolt against commodification and alienation.

### Entrenched Prospects

And indeed other well-kent contributors brought some sense of perspective to what was being argued, in many ways at odds with the whole thrust of the Demos project. But even here there is a predictable tendency to accept that things have indeed been transformed and that, generally, the future is bright and moving in the right direction.

Tom Devine teaches confidence-guru Carol Craig a history lesson about the elite top-down nature of what Neil Davidson calls Scotland's 'bourgeois revolution'.<sup>29</sup> However, Devine suffers from the fallacy that afflicts some historians of reading contemporary trends in terms of discontinuities at the expense of structural continuities.

In response, Craig states that her missionary work to create an egoistic idea of selfhood is nearly done: 'Part of my mission for Scotland is to contribute to the creation of a cultural environment in which people feel they can be themselves'.<sup>30</sup> But she is compelled by Devine to accept that Scotland has *not* been characterised by cultural or social stagnation as her 'crisis of confidence' thesis predicts. So the wrong, passive and craven attitudes and personality traits are impressionistically imputed by Craig to people who have undergone the deep shifts to socio-economic life wrought by the end of national autarchy and the rise of neo-liberalism.

Christopher Harvie desperately casts around for signs of hopefulness in Scotland's situation

within the world crisis on account of rising oil prices and how Trident nuclear submarines might be used to bargain for Scottish independence. Tom Nairn simply ignores the disinterest in large case Nationalism in Scotland to optimistically stress the prospects for constitutional independence against the neo-liberal enthusiast George Kerevan's support for the British state and global capital.

## Utopian Pessimism

It is not at all clear exactly how fatalism comes to be diagnosed nor how the happy prognosis of a positive future is to be conjured up. 'Hope' has been displaced by 'cynicism and critique'.<sup>31</sup> There is some confusion here between cynicism and critique; the former is practised by the power elite as they conduct a campaign of self-interested revanchism, while the latter depends on taking up a critical standpoint in a class-divided society like Scotland.

It might, in fact, be considered the height of cynicism to propose de-classed liberal slogans about hope in the teeth of entrenched class-based material inequalities. All this points to the elite manipulation of masses, 'the people' who need to be 'hopeful', for pre-determined ends.

Anyway, why is 'negativity' seen as 'ignoring the complexity and diversity of any one moment'?<sup>32</sup> Couldn't this be equally viewed as a learned pessimism of the intellect, a necessary blasé attitude appropriate to the disappointed promises of actual social conditions? And, why invest unremitting class oppression and exploitation with positivity?

Recently, Bill Duncan's Anti-Self Help Guide, *The Wee Book of Calvin*, provides a suitable riposte to the Scottish Dr Feelgoods. Duncan emphasises the nature of praxis in the work ethic: 'The work ethic and the inherent sense of unworthiness reject contemplation and stasis, seeking instead self-realization through deed and achievement: DOING and BEING'.<sup>33</sup>

There is a long tradition of adopting recalcitrant pessimism in order to endorse the utopian future immanent to the present, from the Anabaptists

to Benjamin and Bloch in the twentieth century. Bloch discerns such praxis in the fragments of an apparently stubborn reality in theological-dialectical terms as, 'an anticipatory illumination that could never be realised in an ideology of the status quo but, rather, has been connected to it like an explosive'.<sup>34</sup>

Recalcitrant pessimism is a condition found among the 'new proletariat' not just in Scotland but elsewhere in the heartlands of capitalism, from France, as recorded in Pierre Bourdieu's study of social suffering, to the US in Barbara Ehrenreich's study of the American working poor. The problem is to make self-emancipation a meaningful goal, not to advance a variation on the old conformism, designed by think tanks for power elites.

## Notes

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