The scum also rises

"...Everyone is led to think that what he knows represents a local exception. But the overall pattern remains hidden. Information is often given in the local papers, but its general significance, the patterns on the national level, remain obscured."

...What you face here is a very effective kind of ideological control, because one can remain under the impression that censorship does not exist, and in a narrow technical sense that is correct. You will not be imprisoned if you discover the facts, not even if you proclaim them wherever you can. But the results remain the same as if there were real censorship. Social reality is generally concealed by the intelligensia."

Noam Chomsky "Language & Responsibility"

Tourists who wandered through George Square one day last March, would have been a bit confused with the entertainment lined up for them. Some 400 or so police had gathered around and inside the Glasgow City Chambers building, while a large wooden façade told everyone that it was now 1997, 'The Year of Sport'. Was this to be a White Helmets display team performance, with 50 or 60 police on one bike, jumping through flaming hoops? Apparently the police had turned out because they had been told that their fellow council employees (and of course huge bands of travelling anarchists and subversives) were planning to turn up in search of some local democracy. Earlier in the day some demonstrators did turn up, saw the police and went away. The police, standing about doing nothing, stayed on till early evening.

A few days before it had been a different story.

According to the Herald (II/3/97) Councillors, on their way to a budget meeting, were attacked by a picket line waiting for them. According to one Councillor, Christopher Mason: "That was a mob. Apparently members were kicked, spat on, abused. It's a cancer eating into democracy if mobs can roam the streets harassing and bullying people. If that's the debate, then I'm on the side of law

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and order on saying elected assemblies must be allowed to meet to do their business. If you don't like what they do, then vote for somebody else next time." He used to be a Liberal Democrat: it's difficult to say what he is now. Other Councillors complained that the police had: "failed in an abysmal way to control the situation ... It was astonishing that no-one was arrested at the City Chambers.' The Herald states with no attribution (just as fact) that apparently Fire-fighters, who were summoned by a fire alarm "were subjected to abuse by the picket line." A line we've all heard before. Our Lord Provost, Pat Lally has sent a letter to the Chief Constable, expressing "extreme disappointment" with the police; hence the massive but purely symbolic turn-out a few days later. The police, for their part, state in the same report that they had "no instructions other than to keep order in the streets." It looks

like even the police have abandoned the Councillors. It also looks like there will be an inquiry into the matter. Yes it is the Year of Sport all right.

The workers and their supporters had formed the picket line to try to stop the Councillors from setting their budget, which they believe will destroy services in the city, cause 1,400 redundancies, put the Council Tax up by 22% and introduce £80.7m in cuts. The cuts have come every year now in Glasgow since the fateful year of 1990 when the Council had big ideas for the city. Demonstrators are getting justifiably bored of the fixed routine of marching from Blythswood Square to George Square and then home. So, since the Council is their employer and also run by the Labour Party (the worker's friend), they staged a picket line designed to shame the worst Councillors into turning back. Their version of events differs from that offered by the Herald, but before we get to that there is some backtracking to do.

Glasgow City Council (GCC) and its Labour majority, despite the experience of the Poll Tax, despite all their years in power and despite 7 years of cuts, never did get around to organising for combat against the Conservative Government's attacks on local government. They just complied, did what they were told and developed a nasty habit of blaming everyone else when questions were raised, particularly about poverty. Their advice to the people of Glasgow is to 'blame the government', but when the people call out for something more - resistance for example - something dark wells up inside the leaders of the Council, a feeling of powerlessness perhaps, which compels them to turn on the people, particularly council employees and the poor, those they can control. The Social Workers, who are getting sacked, would recognise this as following the classic psychology of a powerless victim of abuse who becomes an abuser themselves. And it is child abuse we are talking about here, and in great numbers. The cuts form an attack principally on children and the weaker sections of the community: the old, disabled, sick, infirm, addicted, homeless and mentally ill. The voiceless. And they form an attack on those who care for them. They are part of a strategy which saw the former government dismantling the welfare state. The Council's response to all this has been to become professional advocates of submission to authority, opponents of insubordination and resistance. Conservatives in other words.

What we've been told for the last 7 years was that they had a big plan for the city. This was an extension of what a former Lord Provost had started when he purchased a meaningless yellow logo for the city back in the early 8os. An obscenely expensive advertising campaign and huge grants to big business formed the basis of their vague strategy for 'inward investment' and the 'development of the service industries.' It is a shallow but relentless publicity stunt. The 'cultural agenda' attached to it is even more wayward. The intention here was that the Council - who confusingly use the word 'Glasgow' or 'The City' when describing their weird ideas - oversee some kind of transformation of everyone's image, which they feel is poor. If we all smarten up our act, Glasgow will become an acceptable holiday destination for businessmen in search of executive relief. They feel (and this reveals some heinous disgust for their electorate) that they have a city full of Rab C. Nesbits and they want him in an Armani suit, just like they have. In Glasgow it is not the Emperor but the subjects who must pretend to have new clothes. This intended shaking off of the old 'bad' image of the 'The City' was always intended to be used on the people of the city, not the Councillors. The feeling is growing that the old image of the city as a corrupt rotten Borough (exemplified in the Cantley affair of the mid 70s) is still hanging in the air; that the gangs stabbing each other in the back, using 'bad language' and getting drunk and reckless at every available opportunity, are now the political factions running the city. For example, lets go back to February when the Council exploded.

At a meeting of the Labour Group Executive, Mr Bob Gould, our leader, set an interesting example when he became greatly agitated because nobody was listening to him or taking him seriously. He is not allowed to chair meetings and feels that the Council is riddled with factions (gangs), which are undermining him and which

were in existence before, but grew much worse when Strathclyde Regional Council and the District Council were 'unified'. Gould eventually became so agitated that he "cracked under pressure" and abandoned a meeting of the full Labour Group shouting the memorable phrase: "I'm not taking anymore of this crap." (Herald 7/2/97) He then told everyone he was going to resign obviously an idle threat. Then things got worse. The next day, his temper still flaring, he gave a media interview and appeared "...to indicate that some Councillors have offered to support him in the forthcoming leadership election in exchange for foreign trips." Instead of saying 'what's new', because this was the run-up to the election, the papers ran the story. Admittedly though, these kind of revelations normally come from the bottom, not the top. It must have been a good night because the next day Mr Gould phoned in to say he would be absent because he "had the flu." This is a national euphemism which needs no explanation. The rest of the Labour group tried to hold a press conference/damage limitation operation: but no one can fit 20 pounds of shit into a 10 pound bag. The week ended on a lighter note with Our Lord Provost, Pat Lally making a routine phone call to see how things were going. He was on holiday in Grand Canaria (one of the money laundering capitals of the world). "After establishing he has no reason to alert his lawyers, he resumed his holiday and has no plans to come home early." (Herald 7/2/97) Apparently there is going to be an inquiry into all this.

It might sound strange, but on analysis the local media, which is now mostly owned by STV, has been steadfast is its editorial ignorance of the crisis facing the city. The efforts of the Herald's more objective(ish) local government correspondents were, in the months leading up to the general election, overshadowed in emphasis and frequency by barely disguised drooling over perceived Labour corruption. But seldom did the paper's management feel sufficiently perturbed by the funding crisis itself to express any editorial opinion. Indeed, those who 'Don't Miss an Issue' may have noticed that this great bastion of Scottish journalism was rather more concerned with urging local government and business to get the city centre tarted up in time for that cultural milestone/millstone which will see us presented to the world as 'The City of Architecture' in 1999. The dumbed-down-for-the-plebs version of the Herald, the Evening Times, was not going to sit back and silently witness the wholesale destruction of the metropolis it serves, or what's left of it. And so the Save Our City campaign was launched to a tidal wave of apathy, helped along nicely by an all-party lucky-bag of headbangers, holding up the launch issue on the lawn outside the Palace of Westminster. The Save Our City campaign seems to have ended - if the city has indeed been saved, then perhaps we should be told.

Of course the cuts are all the fault of the old Conservative government. On analysis their attitude to local government was in evidence long ago. The tactics were clear: here is Michael Forsyth writing back in 1985 in "The Case for the Poll tax" and obviously trying to put ideas into Margaret Thatcher's vicious mind:

"Central funding of local authorities by Government would obviously be a practicable and easily administered option, but it would lead to the destruction of local government as we know it. The responsibilities of a council would be limited to the determination of priorities within both a fixed budget and a legal framework that lays down the standards for most services. A council would become little more than a kind of multi-purpose government agency."

"Such a system would be a recipe for the kind of internecine warfare with central government that some health authorities currently indulge in and that characterises an increasing number of councils. Councillors would claim that they received insufficient money from the Government to carry out their responsibilities. They would cut the most sensitive services to make their point, blaming the Government as loudly as they could. For its part, central government would inevitably take a far more active interest in how money was being spent, no doubt attempting to enforce its views where persuasion failed. The bemused local voters would find themselves suffering in the middle, unsure who to blame for the ensuing chaos."

Ring any bells anyone? We begin to stray into

Gordon Cullen's Plan to 'reaestheticise' Glasgow City Centre. (MacKinsev & Co. 1084. n. 54). notions of reactionary complicity on the part of the Labour party with that bit on the "most sensitive services". The best argument that the Council can muster goes something like this: GCC knows it is being manipulated and made to look stupid and cruel by Central Government. They cannot imagine any way out of this. They simply cannot set an illegal budget - that would be ruinous for the City and bring them into disrepute. Thus the whole issue boils down to respect for due process of law. It is a legal issue. While they make the cuts in the most painful of ways, workers are at perfect liberty to squeal exactly what they are told to squeal.

As to the last sentence from Forsyth, well, either inadvertently or not the Council's own propaganda sheet "Glasgow" (April 97) hired a professor, Arthur Midwinter (Dean of the faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at Strathclyde University) for the purpose of echoing Forsyth's words. At the end of his screed Professor Arthur tells us that "Glaswegians can hold neither centrol (sic) nor local government accountable for the crisis."

Consultancy is something of a boom industry in these impoverished times. For a grossly inflated price you can hire 'professionals' to say practically anything. The Scottish Office spent £250,000 on an 'independent' study into council spending. This was carried out by Coopers & Lybrand and a company called Pieda. This said that Councils were "well funded" and was published on 15/2/97. COSLA, not to be outdone spent some of their meagre budget on an 'independent study' on the impact of spending controls on local authorities, which said: "The restriction would result in the loss of 17,000 jobs and £30m in household income." The people who did the study were just Pieda this time. Pieda is run by the boss of Scottish Enterprise an organisation designed somewhat anachronistically to promote 'Thatcherism' in Scotland, which itself competes with local government, the NHS etc for central government

To return to the theme of reactionary complicity, we also have the following series of events. Before the Council turned belly-up, the Parliamentary Labour Party announced some good news to a Scottish Industry Forum meeting—"In a clear attempt to convince voters and money markets that he means business"—it was announced by George Robertson that Labour would be sticking to the Conservative's public spending limits for the next two years. Limits set to control Councils and tinker with the welfare state. There would be no extra cash—so we can expect the same cuts next year and the year after that. That was on the 20th of January to a bunch of Business people. The Local authorities got wind of it and were said to be 'seething'. Five days later George Robertson came up with a brilliant solution: resurrect the Poll Tax. Press reports (Herald 25/1/97) stated that:

"George Robertson offered to open up Britain's tax records to local authorities chasing people who have dodged the poll tax or council tax payments."

This was to "soften the blow" of new council budgets and is a tactic even the Tories didn't stoop to. It met with a "warm response" from the largely Labour dominated Local authority leaders, the report went on:

"Indeed they have suggested that an incoming Labour government go further and allow Councils to make deductions from Social Security payments without having to go to court." Barely concealing his glee, a spokesman for COSLA, Financial Director, Dave Sneller—is quoted by the Herald to have stated that:

"He did not think the labour proposals would be viewed as an infringement of civil liberties or unnecessary... 'There is over £700m owing and we have to get the money somehow.' He added that enforcement measures, which would involve changing the law, would be targeted at people who had the money to pay and benefit arrestments would involve taking small amounts of money over a long period."

So it seems that when it comes to screwing the poor strict adherence to the law is not such a big deal as it is when setting a budget or when people protest. The strange thing is that our Labour-run local authority in Glasgow were handing over their hard fought 'legal budget' to a Tory government which had about a month left of its existence. Or maybe they thought that the

party wouldn't win, and we can forgive them for that. It is going to be very tricky next year when there is no Tory government to blame. But think of all that £700m. What will they do with it? Spending it on the poor would be an idea which would unite us all, but of course they have to get it off them first. And then every penny of it will have to go back to central government, those are the rules and they know it. This is Councillor Des McNulty, vice chair of policy and resources, complaining about this and inadvertently revealing how the economic renaissance is coming along, why businesses should (or is that shouldn't) come to big booming Glasgow and 'create' some wealth:

"Since April last year Glasgow has been squeezed by Government Gerrymandering into the smallest territorial area of the 4 major Scottish cities...Currently, around £210m a year is collected in Glasgow in the form of nondomestic rates is pooled across Scotland. After handing its revenues over, the city gets back less than £160m. In other words, it suffers a net loss of almost £50m. This is a tax on wealth creation in Glasgow."

There is little talk of changing the law on that little set-up. It is just simply easier to screw the poor over a long period of time and cut the services they depend upon. In Glasgow 58% of the city's 81,000 school pupils receive clothing grants, while around 43% receive free school meals. In Drumchapel the figures are 84% and 68%, in Easterhouse it is 87.2% and 64.3%. We could trot out endless figures proving the existence of widespread poverty, but the council will continue to ignore these facts in favour of their higher calling of turning the city centre into tastelessland, not that many Councillors want to spend much time in Glasgow themselves when there are free holidays to be had. The Social and Community workers, the Teachers and drug workers who were denounced as a violent mob, went on strike because they know that they cannot hold the meagre fabric of social services together. The Council feels powerless because they know they do not have the people behind them. There is no sign of that faith ever returning, not now. When the 'junkets' enquiry finally gets published in September, 'The City' will be the venue of another Council initiative: the 67th Congress of the American Society of Travel Agents. And the inquiry looks bad, it's not the left they are after, they were dealt with some time ago. The Evening Times of 22/5/97 had this to say:

"Moves being planned include stripping the Glasgow city party of the right to pick candidates for the 1999 election, a move which has angered and upset many sitting Councillors...Labour's purge is unprecedented in Scotland. The only similar action by the party was against Derek Hatton's Militant Tendency in Liverpool, more than a decade ago." And then of course we have the Sarwar affair.

Questions of fundamental principle have disappeared in Glasgow and questions of management prevail. It is one way for our Councillors to ignore the horror of their grievous mistake. What they also ignore is that our laws are made for the public good, and, for the public good they may be suspended. Furthermore the public good is not to be considered, if it is purchased at the expense of an individual. Authorities are legitimate if they govern well. Whether they do govern well those who they govern must decide. These unwritten laws reign supreme over our municipal law. Or are we wrong as to the basis of democracy. Perhaps there is no such thing as right. Politics are then an affair of might. A mere struggle for power.

Calculated barbarities inflicted on women and children are usually justified by the necessity of striking terror. Then the only message that needs to be officially declared is that whatever is is right. What has happened in 'Glasgow's renaissance' is that our Councillors have forgotten that they are public servants: they seek to be masters of the public. Their final appeal for justification to be seen as 'elected representatives' is a brave one given the mockery they have made of democracy and given the lesser known facts of the 'election procedure' which takes place in the back rooms of Glasgow's Labour Clubs.

This is an eyewitness account of the demonstration from an interview with Variant. Although it was offered, we declined to print the name of the individual.

"The response we got to the official strike on the 6th of March was unusually high, about 98%, but when we got to work on the Monday people were unhappy. I walked straight into a Union meeting and heard about the Council making the Budget decision that morning. People asked their area management if they could use their flexi-time to extend their dinner break to attend, it was not intended to be an all-day thing. The management, in collusion with the Council, banned flexi-time, no reason was given. The government has to give us permission to go on strike, several days notice has to be given, so Monday was an unofficial strike, although Unison did back us.

We went down to the march and heard the loudspeakers at the balcony. We had been aware that people had occupied the Chambers over the weekend and we joined the crowd. As councillors turned up people were trying to engage them in conversation, but they were ducking and diving, avoiding the people. A chant of "shame on you" started. That's the first time I realised that the people were getting active, because the Councillors had fucked off round the corner to get in at another door. I personally got a hold of John Young, he was with a policeman, a top cop, and I told him that people wanted him to go home for one day and not pass the budget. He said: "people like you didn't vote me in." How does he know what I voted? I said: "Are you a councillor? Do you think people are here for nothing?" And all he said was: "They never elected me, I'm Conservative I don't need to answer anything."

It was not a picket line at that point, just people standing outside the Chambers looking up at the people inside the building who were asking for help and saying, "we can't let them do this, are you going to just stand there and watch?" By this time, about 12, there were lots of people joining in, just people doing their shopping, kids in prams, just the people of Glasgow. A young boy told us that the Councillors were going in the side. Somebody suggested covering the doors, so they'd have to cross a picket line. We knew they needed about 24 to form a quorum, we were getting information from the inside. We were also told that the if meeting had not started by 2.30 it wouldn't happen today, that intensified people's efforts, we were then a working party.

Some people started charging at the picket line. One guy actually grabbed one of the line and put him on the street, we were attacked about 4 or 5 times (all by guys with suits—business people trying to get in to make money). Now the police were sound throughout and told them that that constituted assault. We became very determined: it was a line of iron because of the numbers. The real motivating thing was all the council vans and private cars all beeping their horns and doing circuits of George Square in support. Then it went on the telly and the numbers increased by about 1,000, you could feel the volume: the telly never brought a single dissenter out, they were all supporters. We had two official strikes and the press coverage was as minimal as possible; we have an unofficial strike and we go live on air - why not for the official strike?

The police were asked to assist people going into the Chambers on numerous occasions. What I seen was a brilliant bit of policing by a young officer. A woman was calling us 'left-wing activists', and 'scum,' basically. The young policeman escorted her over and asked: "Can this woman get through?" We said: "Nobody is getting through, not before 2.30." The police said: "You realise it's technically illegal not to let someone through?" We said, "yes". The boy informed us of the law "technically," and after this he said: "You realise I'll have to inform my superior officer? The woman said: "Is that all you're going to do!" He said: "Other than forcibly removing everyone—which I'm not prepared to do till I've spoken to my superior officer—that's all I'm going to do." That's what they're meant to be there for—informing the public.

People waited and the word came round that the meeting had been held in a side room. It must have been a short meeting, the decision was clarified by 2.30, there was no way any announcements were heard and a Tory confirmed that to us, because they declared it an illegal meeting.

I've never seen so many drooping heads. But people went round the front The people on the balcony said: "We tried to stop them and they've just sold us down the river. The police have said that nobody is going to be charged as long as we give them our names and addresses." Ten minutes later they started to walk out of the building. The press took over: 6 or 7 protesters were escorted down to the cameras as they came out, but they declined an interview or any comment. Then they started walking down the road with a banner in front of them and we all fell in behind them and started marching round the square—the old defiant Scottish thing.

William Clark Robert Doohihan