

Social democracy and labourism

Alex Law

Kenny MacAskill

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Introduction

In this chapter, we consider the potential for labourism and social democracy to roll back neo-liberalism in Scotland. This requires some clarification of what ‘labourism’ and ‘social democracy’ mean in the context of neo-liberal Scotland. Labourism is an ideology founded on the capacity of the industrial working class to effect ameliorative political change. The chief ends of post-war social democracy were full employment, progressive redistribution of income and wealth, and a ‘cradle to grave’ welfare state. Social democracy would be delivered by the Labour Party in parliament, buttressed by the union movement, as the organic representatives of working-class interests. Until relatively recently, British labourism helped to naturalise the UK state as the taken-for-granted institutional framework for reforming capitalism and alleviating social suffering.

This chapter then asks whether labourism continues to have any relevance for an aspiring social democratic Scotland in the greatly changed context of a reconstituted working class and a highly constrained union movement contending with the crisis-ridden rapids of neo-liberalism. As the local fraction of ‘the planetary neoliberal vulgate’ identified two

decades ago by Bourdieu and Wacquant (2001), Scotland is governed by a highly educated, socially unrepresentative professional-managerial class (PMC) which has banished all talk of ‘capitalism’, ‘class’ and ‘exploitation’ as obsolete (see Chapter 12). This takes on additional significance for a small, inter-connected polity like Scotland where neo-liberal prescriptions are advanced alongside social democratic verities in the form of competitive nationalism. An independent Scottish state, it was (and continues to be) hoped, would undo the iniquities inflicted on society and economy by neo-liberalism. Yet the competitive nationalism advanced in some quarters of the independence movement suggests otherwise.

First, we briefly outline the vicissitudes of social democracy and labourism in Scotland. Second, any discussion of neo-liberalism in Scotland needs to address the class basis of competitive nationalism. Finally, we argue for ‘progressive neo-liberalism’ to be supplanted by egalitarian democracy in post-pandemic Scotland.

Social Democracy and Neo-liberalism in Scotland

Labourism gave way to civic nationalism in Scotland as the best way to preserve what was left of social democracy and to progressively extend social protection and greater equality. As is well known, working-class support for Labour collapsed after 2014 while the SNP made historic incursions deep into the ranks of the young working class and well-educated professional-managerial class, especially in new towns and suburbs, but also resonating with the old working-class heartlands of Dundee and Glasgow. Scottish nationalism appeared to decisively supplant British labourism, substituting the social harmony of civic nationalism for class division as its motivating ideology. New Labour’s ‘third way’ foundered in Scotland on the back of its aggressive commitment to neo-liberal polit-

ical economy at the expense of welfare nationalism (Law 2005). Some of the worst of these practices were revoked by SNP Scottish Government reforms, including the removal of charges for medical prescriptions, university fees and care for the elderly, enabling Scottish nationalism to effectively claim for itself the mantle of social democracy in Scotland.

People in Scotland are not inherently more radical than elsewhere (Gall 2005), although survey data consistently suggest that they feel themselves to be slightly more socially democratic in their social attitudes than England (Yarde and Wishart 2020). A huge majority (81%) of people in Scotland feel society falls well short of the ideal image they have for it and that the UK government has been singularly unsuccessful at tackling inequalities, a feeling especially acute among supporters of independence (Yarde and Wishart 2020: 10). Support for parties identified as social democratic (Labour, Liberal Democrats and SNP) has also been consistently higher in Scotland since the Scottish Parliament was formed more than two decades ago. While a large majority of people in both Scotland and England perceive income distribution to be unfair, Scots are more likely to feel strongly that inequalities are ‘very unfair’, to object that higher incomes are able to buy better health care and education, and more marginally, that higher earners ought to pay more tax (Yarde and Wishart 2020: 13). SNP supporters are more likely to be dissatisfied with the lack of political will to address inequalities (Yarde and Wishart 2020: 15).

In any case, post-war social democracy was never the exclusive preserve of British Labour. Social democracy formed an ideological consensus amongst ruling elites for three decades until the mid-1970s. A need for the state reform of capitalism was shared by ruling Conservative and Labour governments alike. Social democracy developed as part of a pragmatic adaptation imposed on political elites by a combative labour

movement reshaped by the experience of total war and conditions of post-war economic boom. A long-term process of democratisation across British society eroded traditional ideals of deference to a natural hierarchical order. With the promise of non-market social reforms, nationalisation of economic assets and institutionalised class conflict, the British state hoped to stabilise threats to the social order posed by democratisation processes, post-imperial retreat and ailing British capitalism.

By undermining the disciplining of workers via market-based coercion, which was no longer accepted by workers as a self-evident 'law of nature', post-war social democracy thus created an apparently intractable problem for capital. Thatcherism and Blairism forged a practical neo-liberal political economy that imposed greater market dependency on labour as atomised individuals. In this process, social democracy mutated into social liberalism as the ideological adjunct of economic neo-liberalism. Labourism wilted in the face of the twin demands of social liberalism and electoral calculation. With the left increasingly marginalised by this hostile environment, union leaders and party conferences abandoned what they viewed as the superannuated positions of social democracy and succumbed more or less willingly to the terrain of social liberalism.

Whatever Happened to Labourism?

Ralph Miliband (1961) long ago argued that the ideology of labourism ensnared socialism in a trap, caught between state power and civic power. On the one hand parliament, and on the other hand the labour movement. Despite his critique of the Labour Party, Miliband came to argue there was no alternative but to grudgingly accept that Labour is the principal agency of social democratic reforms. Until the 1980s, the view

could be entertained by Miliband and many others that militant grassroots trade unionism could impose a more radical programme of social justice on the parliamentary Labour Party.

A central problem for labourism was that it rested on an unchanging conception of class relations premised on large industrial workplaces that were the masculine preserve of the manual working class. Class can all too easily be frozen in time and space, fixed to particular lifestyles, or abandoned altogether as historically obsolete. This problem is accentuated when 'white' male industrial manual labour is taken as the prototype for 'the working class', with the implication that highly qualified, non-manual labour somehow forms a class apart or one that transcends class-bound realities.

Deindustrialisation in Scotland acted like an acid to dissolve the class assumptions of labourism. In many ways, the survival of more or less stable class inter-dependencies between 1945 and 1970 was contingent upon the long economic boom, assertive workplace unions and welfare state. This state of exception cannot be taken as a datum to assess class relations in Scotland today. In Scotland, the traditional classes on which political support depended – landowners, industrial bourgeoisie and organised labour – have undergone radical transformation. In the process, classes correspond even less neatly to political alignments than at any time since the 1920s.

Fractions of the PMC in the public sector – health, education, civil service, local government – and in the service sector more broadly have been shifting their political allegiance from labourism to nationalism, attracted perhaps by the prospects of an independent nation-state needing to fill high-level state functions. Such functions demand advanced levels of education acquired over long periods of unwaged study. Extensive preparation outside the workplace and the feeble investment in research and development of private capital in Scotland

help explain the PMC's authority in Scotland. Through long years of austerity, however, public sector professions became far less secure, as many grades of staff experienced cuts, officious managerialism and task overload.

The disappearance of the working class as a supposedly homogenous collective subject in Scotland, as elsewhere, compliments the self-image of the PMC as a universal ideal. For some, the working class is a zombie category, artificially kept alive by devouring the energies of political activists and misguided intellectuals, requiring little evidence beyond ritualistic invocation from a revered liturgy. We are all 'middle-class' now, except, that is, for a few malingerers on the margins of society. By dismissing all talk about the working class as an empty ideological slogan, politicians endlessly propound the neo-liberal project of individual self-improvement to develop more resilient, flexible and marketable forms of 'human capital'.

Class and Democracy

Devolution was premised upon the need to restore democracy and accountability to 'the regions' in response to the crisis of democratic legitimacy of the unitary UK state. People fought for independence in 2014 as part of a long tradition of democratic struggles for the right of self-rule by the people in the pursuit of 'autonomy, dignity, civic rights and egalitarian socio-economic change' (Therborn 2020: 23).

While the unreformed UK state remains resistant to democratic accountability, in Scotland small circles of enclosed political and civic elites orbit around Holyrood. Democracy is reduced to a sport managed by an inter-connected layer of the PMC: career politicians, advisors, officials, lobbyists, researchers, think tanks, consultants, public relations specialists and media journalists. MSPs are overwhelmingly drawn

from formative occupations in middle-class professions, including lawyers, teachers and lecturers, or as functionaries in ‘politics-facilitating roles’ (Cairney et al. 2016). Both groups tend to be educated at select schools and universities. Very few elected politicians in Scotland are drawn from a background in working-class occupations.

An unrepresentative and unelected Scottish state represents a major barrier to achieving a more egalitarian and democratic Scotland. The unelected state in Scotland has a long history stretching back to the Scottish Office in the nineteenth century and corporatist forms of governance in the twentieth century. In the latter case, organised labour was incorporated by the governing bodies of a semi-autonomous civil society. In the shadow of deindustrialisation, neo-liberalism and devolution, the incorporated power of labourism has been replaced by a shallow pluralism and a hardening centralisation of unelected power.

Hopes the Scottish Parliament would revitalise social democracy came up against the limits of parliamentary democracy to accommodate the kind of deep-seated structural change required for even minimal forms of distributive justice and the rolling back of neo-liberalism. To simplify considerably, the first phase from 1999 to 2007 involved a parliamentary alliance between Labour and the Liberal Democrats. This political species was largely continuous with ‘third way’ ‘new’ Labour UK governments, whose central purpose was to consolidate and deepen neo-liberal political economy initiated by Thatcherism in the 1980s.

Since 2007, a second phase saw SNP governments enact popular measures to curtail the most gratuitous forms of ‘the enclosure of the commons’ and the commodification of public services in Scotland. Even here, however, this was social democracy-lite at best, hemmed in by neo-liberal nostrums about small nations like Scotland being agile and flexible

enough to exact competitive advantage at the interstices of neo-liberal globalisation. First Minister Alex Salmond (2008) claimed that Scotland could become a ‘Celtic Lion’ in emulation of the ‘Celtic Tiger’ of neo-liberal Ireland, nimbly taking competitive advantage of the pre-crisis banking sector: ‘With RBS and HBOS – two of the world’s biggest banks – Scotland has global leaders today, tomorrow and for the long term’ (Salmond 2008). If even an astute politician and experienced economist could be taken in by such hyperbole, then sober analysis is required of the prospects for social democracy in Scotland, whether inside or outside the Union.

Many activists look to a vibrant grassroots independence movement to press the ultra-cautious SNP leadership for more daring policies that begin to equalise the starting conditions of life chances across Scottish society. Grassroots mobilisations always threaten to push beyond the controlled prescriptions of the SNP. When a humanitarian protest in the Pollokshields area of Glasgow prevented the Home Office from forcibly removing immigrants in May 2021, it momentarily threw into relief the tension between images of the coercive UK state and a more benign ‘progressive’ Scottish sub-state. Scothorne (2021: 8) noted that disruptive protests like Pollokshields suggested ‘the gap between Scottish and British politics has a radicalising potential that goes beyond the question of independence’. Yet the political gap also has the potential to serve flattering self-images of social democratic Scotland in defiance of stubborn socio-economic realities.

Egalitarian Democracy or Progressive Neo-liberalism?

Just as labourism was readily incorporated into state institutions, so the symbolic capital of new social movements is available to be sequestered by neo-liberalism. What Fraser (2019) termed ‘progressive neo-liberalism’ formed a hegem-

onic bloc out of the symbolic capital of the new social movements – feminism, multi-culturalism, anti-racism, gay and trans rights, environmentalism – allied to a deeply regressive political economy. Progressive motifs are routinely mobilised by leaders of public sector organisations, and high-tech, corporate, financial and rentier capital. Individuals with the required types of social, economic and especially cultural capital are the principal beneficiaries of progressive neo-liberalism.

A variant of progressive neo-liberalism was incorporated into the devolved state through the social intimacy of elite networks in a small nation. The same faces appear year-in, year-out, with a select few, including erstwhile radicals, exercising disproportionate influence. The field of governance now orbits around an unelected and unaccountable but highly influential civic elite that reproduces itself, often supported by public patronage. Indeed, the Scottish state actively regulates ‘civic Scotland’ through its patronage networks, particularly in relation to the voluntary sector and arts, and even organised labour through the STUC.

The politics of class is essential to egalitarian democracy in Scotland. Today, the social fact of worker self-organisation is routinely dismissed as anachronistic, ‘workerist’ or ‘class reductionist’. Classes are not made according to some preconceived plan. Class is always in process as a relationship to, first, other classes and, second, within the same class. Although classes are functionally and dynamically inter-dependent, they also develop at a social distance from each other. Mobilising the language of class gives expression to antagonistic social interests. In this sense, labourism helped constitute the working class and identified its interests with Labour. However, static labourist conceptions of class proved a fateful weakness when class relations were reconstituted with the dis-

solution of social collectivities in workplaces and communities into disposable, market-dependent individuals.

Scotland is not anywhere closer to becoming a classless society. Class advantages and disadvantages are being remorselessly passed on inter-generationally. Despite democratic efforts to equalise opportunities through widening educational access in Scotland, cultural conditioning is a game at which even the squeezed PMC will always manage to keep their children's noses out in front.

Attachment to class is not simply a matter of instrumental necessity. It is also a matter of cognitive perception and emotional solidarity. Profound class distinctions structure an everyday consciousness of social reality, not least through hierarchies of social evaluation and demonisation. Here the re-introduction of the lexicon of class into the Scottish public sphere, unburdened by labourist assumptions, might break the spell that we somehow all mingle freely in a fluid society of individuals, made flesh by viral networks and creative juices released by the 'knowledge economy', rewarding personalised human capital of resilience, expertise and creativity, and let the devil take the hindmost.

The labourist conception of social democracy depended on capturing the centralised power of the UK state for socially progressive ends amenable to national capitalism. Until the pandemic, it was argued that nation-states could no longer defy the forces of neo-liberal global markets, neglecting, of course, the constitutive role of the state in forming neo-liberal orders. States were circumscribed in their scope for large-scale public spending, and any progressive redistribution of resources was unthinkable lest cosmopolitan elite leaders and managers deprive the UK of their handsomely remunerated talents. Unable to contest neo-liberalism by wielding state authority, the best that could be hoped for were decentralised struggles and local campaigns.

Austerity compounded the maldistribution of income and wealth and intensified social suffering. Drastically regressive tax and benefit reforms further impoverished wider layers of British society as the price of the sovereign debt crisis, which, in turn, is the price of profligate financial capital. Yet, in response to the pandemic, the UK state embarked on a colossal programme of public borrowing and spending after imposing austerity for more than a decade. In this state of exception, the centralised nation-state revealed its capacity for society-wide planning, co-ordination and resource allocation, albeit under a dysfunctional Tory Government that sought to enrich its own elite group and prop up a reactionary neo-liberal variant of capitalism. So, clearly, there were a multitude of problems with how this was done, not least the stench of endemic corruption at the level of state and business elites, as well as the dilapidated state of the NHS and public sector after decades of privatisation, marketisation and managerialism. But, nevertheless, it was done.

With the re-legitimisation of state action, the Scottish state could become a pole of attraction for extending the claims of social democracy by yoking the redistributive politics of material equality to the inclusive politics of social equality. If inequalities of wealth and power are understood primarily through the prism of class division and agency, then this will have definite social and political effects. Its effect will be to more adequately organise cognition of social and economic relations and exert a rival political diagnosis over rather less compelling dogmas about competitive nationalism and progressive neo-liberalism currently doing the rounds in Scotland.

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