**We inhabit purgatory. How do we get out?**

**Coll McCail**

**For those who hoped 2023 would be the moment that Scotland broke with its stagnant political cycle, the beginning of this year was disappointing. On the same day in earlier January, two separate opinion polls indicated that support for Scottish independence sat simultaneously at 46% and 54%.**

Whilst the SNP decide which election they want to turn into a de facto referendum, the Tories delight at the prospect of another few years when public debate does not seriously consider the failings of the status quo. It is difficult, then, to avoid the conclusion that in Scotland we are doomed to inhabit purgatory for a while longer.

Indeed, one week in January encapsulated the current Scottish political situation rather neatly. The Scottish Government announced that both the Firth of Forth and the Cromarty Firth would be home to ‘Green freeports’. A brainchild of the Friedmanite right wing, in Rishi Sunak’s words, freeports are “free-market enterprise zones”. They effectively operate outside of national boundaries and so shirk all democratic accountability, providing low-tax, deregulated playgrounds for private capital. This news was celebrated by Scottish and UK ministers because, whilst freeports may weaken workers’ rights, they’re music to the ears of the corporate lobby to which both governments are beholden.

Days later, as the UK Government mounted a determined attack on devolution, this harmony was broken. When Alistair Jack announced his intention to use the Scotland Act to block Holyrood’s GRR bill, our politics returned to the terrain on which they have been stuck since 2014. This time it was the Tory's decision to deny trans rights which, quite correctly, took public discourse back to the national question. However, last year it was the SNP’s indulgence in idle theatre at the Supreme Court which did so.

All of a sudden, the Scottish Government stopped applauding the assault on democracy unleashed by freeports and came to its aid. This is the story of the last decade. The political class in Edinburgh and London are complicit in perpetuating a stitch-up which allows both to advance their respective agendas, yet simultaneously trample all over Scottish democracy.

Although 2022 saw more days lost to strike action than at any point over the last 10 years, it remains the case that if we are to build a popular case for socialism in Scotland, we must break decisively with the politics of this stalemate. Our current situation suits the Scottish Government’s milquetoast neoliberalism as much as it does those who drape themselves in union jacks. The question then is, how do we escape?

We can look to 2022 for the beginnings of an answer to this question. As Britons endured the largest slump in living standards since the 1970s, the boost to class confidence was palpable. Workers across Britain refused to accept real-term wage cuts and, in spite of the mainstream media’s slander campaign, maintained the support of the general public. This was reflected not only on crowded picket lines but in the many campaigns that sprung up to support the struggle of rail and postal workers, teachers and cleansing workers, civil servants and nurses. Historically low polling results for the Conservative Party led even the Barclay brother’s Telegraph to declare that the Party found itself on “life support”.

If we do not capitalise on this growth in consciousness, we will miss an opportunity to turn popular fury at the way things are, into popular belief that things don’t have to stay the same. We owe it to the thousands of workers who have taken strike action over the last year to make the case for an economy which works in their interest. That requires making the case for radical change.

In Scotland, local democracy has been decimated by austerity. Councils, barely able to provide essential services, have become administrative bodies devoid of all politics as a consequence of Scottish Government centralisation. This can be seen in the SNP’s plans for a National Care Service which leaves local authorities almost entirely out of the picture. The result is that councils are seen to provide services and dish out parking tickets, rather than being sites of resistance to those intent on waging class warfare. Councillors themselves lack hope in local politics.

Far from simply passing Westminster’s austerity agenda down the chain, this practice forms an essential plank of the SNP’s project. Their reason for deliberately hampering the radical potential of local government is obvious.

For 5 years, Labour’s North Ayrshire administration proved councils can act as an alternative by deploying a model of municipal socialism which began to reorganise the local economy. The Labour minority administration created Scotland’s first community investment fund, began a mass council house building programme, turned former landfill sites into council-owned solar farms and funded dedicated mental health counsellors in every school.

However, last May when the SNP took control of the council, this work began to be reversed. That’s because North Ayrshire’s efforts challenged the central premise of the Scottish Government's platform: That the current constitutional settlement leaves Holyrood without the power to do anything but manage a status quo geared against the working class.

There are those who argue that to focus too much on localism is to bury one's head in the sand and retreat from national confrontation. However, in Scotland, local government should form the base of our case against the politics of the last decade. If councils can advance the course of a different kind of society, then why do we accept that Holyrood is incapable of doing so?

Of course, any serious effort to reorganise society has to look beyond political democracy. Democratising the economy requires the development of an industrial strategy which will transform the workplace. This year marks half a century since the publication of Labour’s 1973 ‘Programme for Britain’.  The document proposed shop-floor based structures of industrial democracy organised through trade union channels. With plans to nationalise North Sea oil and the nation’s 25 largest manufacturing companies, the programme drew a blueprint for an irreversible shift of wealth and power in Britain.

As inspiring as the 1973 programme is, it couldn't be applied today. The economy has changed, manufacturing has declined and the rise of finance capital means it would not work. The point though is that if democratising the economy is part of the solution to breaking free of our political cycle, and it is, then it must be accompanied by an industrial strategy that empowers workers and their communities.

One of the obvious challenges to this plan is the Labour Party. Keir Starmer would rather swan around Davos than stand with workers on the picket line. Our ability to influence Labour Party policy is negligible given the leadership ignores the democratically expressed will of the membership. Our ability to organise internally is restrained by a Labour Party machine which blocks working-class trade unionists in favour of ghosts from the past.

For the hope of change then we must look to the unions, campaigns and movements which last year led the struggle for a new world. Whether it was unions winning inflation-busting pay rises for their members, campaigns fighting the energy crisis forcing the government to act or Scotland’s tenant's union winning a rent freeze, 2022 proved the power of collective struggle. Trade unions do far more than defend their members' pay. Indeed, recently major victories have come from union-led campaigns for change outside of the workplace. It is the CWU, for example, that has played a pivotal role in advancing the case for community wealth building.

In 2023, let’s look to this burgeoning coalition to lead Scotland out of its political stalemate with a vision for a different kind of economy, with demands for change that are possible within the confines of the current constitutional settlement.

Unlike for those in purgatory, Scotland can go in one of two ways. That’s why this year is so important. As Scotland’s labour movement gears up to oppose the Tory's new anti-trade union laws, we must also shatter the myth that the politicians we elect to represent us are, in fact, powerless to help. With a clear vision for a new, reorganised society, propelled by the campaigns which erupted from popular discontent with the neoliberal order in 2022, things can, and will, change.

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