

## Red Clyde and Yellow Press

By Christopher Harvie,  
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### I Judgment on Murdoch

When Tommy Sheridan, black-browed and lantern-jawed, confronted the press outside the Court of Session in Edinburgh on 4 August 2006 after his libel-case victory against the *News of the World*, the figure conjured to mind was not in the least radical, but one from over 200 years ago. Lord Braxfield [1], the hammer of the Scots Jacobins and a Tory neanderthal, was made - by Robert Louis Stevenson - into the embodiment of Doric Scotland in *Weir of Hermiston*.

Sheridan [2] – gravel-voiced, unpitied and merciless – made Bob Bird, the editor of the Scottish edition of the tabloid ("red-top") newspaper, into a whining Cockney, kin to the wretched Duncan Jopp, whom Hermiston tossed about like a terrier. See Michael Mackenzie, magnificent as the old monster (without subtitles), at the Netherbow nightly at eight.

That's enough Edinburgh Festival [3]. But what's significant about the Sheridan verdict is the culture it represents. This is only partly to do with the judgment on his creation, the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP [4]), which has blown the chances that only Sheridan gave it and faces extinction in the May 2007 elections to the Scottish parliament at Holyrood.

A lash-up of ex-Militant Tendency activists, ex-Socialist Workers Party members, and sundry other far-out sects, the SSP remained true to the tradition of leftist doctrinal hair-splitting (something inherited from militant Presbyterianism) – like the apocryphal Scottish United Workers' Party which "held its AGMs in a telephone box". But something far older in the annals of the Scottish left is involved, running back indeed to groups and individuals active in the era opened by the French Revolution of 1789: the Friends of the People, Robert Burns and Thomas Muir of Huntershill [5].

Muir, the Jacobin whose buckle might have been swashed by Errol Flynn, was a lawyer. The Labour movement and the Scottish courts are no strangers to one another, though Braxfield-style confrontations have long gone. In the 1820s the Court of Session tempered the winds of *laissez-faire* in the interests of the Scottish workers. A decade later it allowed high Tory sheriff Archibald Alison [6] to crush the Spinners' Union. In the 1930s the first Scottish Socialist Party (the faction of the once-great Independent Labour Party that stayed inside the Labour Party when the ILP disaffiliated in 1932) sued the ILP [7] to try to get its property back - it lost in 1940, and sank with the legal costs. The Sheridan case has telescoped this process, but with no more optimistic outcome.

Sheridan's triumph [8] over the *News of the World* was signal, a first stage in reforming perhaps the most repellent mass media in Europe. But it leaves his party of rank amateurs in total meltdown, and Sheridan himself preparing to surrender dreams of reclaiming its leadership and instead form his own cabal [9]. The 1707 union between the parliaments of Scotland and

England, and the political culture it produced, approach a tercentenary moment on 16 January 2007 in not-much-better condition.

### **Also by Christopher Harvie in openDemocracy:**

"[Journeys to the Rhine](#) [9]" (January 2002)

"[Looking into Wales: a nation displayed](#) [9]"  
(March 2002)

"[Remembering Robin Cook](#) [9]" (August 2005)

"[The German solution?](#) [9]" (September 2005)

"[A Scottish-Chinese dream: Maglev made easy](#) [9]" (January 2006)

"[Gordon Brown's Britain](#) [9]" (January 2006)

"[A German dream: some day my prince will come](#) [9]" (June 2006)

Among Christopher Harvie's many books are *A Short History of Scotland* ([OUP, 2002](#) [10]), *Deep Fried Hillman Imp* ([Argyll, 2004](#) [11]) and *Mending Scotland* ([Argyll, 2005](#) [12]).

Christopher Harvie's homepage is [here](#) [13]

### **II At hame wi' freedom?**

The jury's verdict wasn't about the internal politics of the SSP or Sheridan's private life. It had the chance to humiliate the *News of the World*, and a tabloid press which is a standing humiliation to the Scottish people. Sheridan grasped this and gave it all he had. The episode may even pierce Rupert Murdoch's carapace. For where does the "dirty digger" go if the Tories – the [Scottish Conservatives](#) [14] (no longer the "Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party", and now in opposition in Holyrood as they are in London's Westminster) - don't manage a Scottish comeback?

The whole episode is a last reckoning with Labour's ghosts, in particular the image of the articulate radical socialist hero out of the west who recurs, Galahad-like, offering to clean up Glasgow and lead its workers to the promised land: the Marxist educator [John MacLean](#) [15] ("great John Maclean" in [Hamish Henderson's](#) [16] immortal song-tribute) in the first world war, the fiery ILP parliamentarian James Maxton in the inter-war slump, the trades-union communist Jimmy Reid fighting the UCL shipyard closures in the 1970s.

This dream of what [Alasdair Gray](#) [17] has called "the Scottish Cooperative Wholesale Republic" was crafted in 1960 by Hamish Henderson into the Scots' best national anthem, the [Freedom Come All Ye](#) [18]:

"Now come a' ye at hame wi' freedom,  
Never heed what the corbies cry o' doom.  
In yer hoose a' the bairns o' Adam  
Will hae breid, barley-bree, an' pentit room.

When MacLean meets wi' his freends in Springburn  
A' the roses an geans will turn tae bloom

And the black boy frae 'yont Nyanga  
Dings the fell gallows o' the burghers doon."

The problematic goes much deeper – into an inert economy, an inefficient and unresponsive state sector, steered episodically by an inflated political class, the *numpties* or *sweetie-wifies* lining the Labour benches in Holyrood, for whom a grammatical sentence is an achievement.

### III Finest hour and kiss of death

In his by now lengthy career Sheridan has acted as people's tribune and swept the opposition off the stage. This apocalyptic succession, however, mystifies the problem of the Scottish economy, in continued crisis for nearly a century.

The Red Clyde mythos [19] - built around the notion of an industrial working-class solidarity as the political and moral foundation of radical Scottish aspiration – has obscured the west of Scotland's real finest hour, when between 1916 and 1918 the Clyde Munitions District won the "great war" for the Allies. Before 1914 the river was, unlike Vickers at Barrow or Armstrong-Whitworth at Newcastle, mainly concerned with merchant shipping. By 1918 it was not only churning out escorts and freighters to make up for the losses inflicted by German U-boats, but dominated the production of aircraft and tanks, not to speak of the high-explosive shells which were decisive on the Western Front.

The labour aristocrats of the yards and workshops were thin-skinned and stropky at the best of times, and munitions minister Lloyd George and his managers handled them crassly. A regime of coercion and concession – state control of housing and rents would last seventy years – brought them on side. The Clyde was unaffected by the unrest of 1917 in Sheffield and south Wales, partly because some agitators were jailed or exiled, but more probably because so many sons and brothers were in service, either at the front or on the convoys.

A Scots élite in government – chancellor Andrew Bonar Law, Labour's Arthur Henderson and George Barnes, air minister Weir, shipping controller Maclay, the Geddeses (Mona, Auckland and Eric) were the "men of push and go", a reprise of Thomas Carlyle's stern "captains of industry". In Germany, Walter Rathenau and Erich Ludendorff couldn't match them, and later Joseph Goebbels would study the masterly propaganda of John Buchan [20] as minutely as Buchan had studied Freud and Jung.

In 1920-21, after shipping losses had been replaced, it all fell apart. No one wanted destroyers or tanks or fighting planes, so effectively Scottish industrial capitalism had a heart attack *and* a nervous breakdown. Investment and trained manpower rushed for shelter to big concerns which offered security: the railways, the banks, ICI, the City and above all the state sector – and stayed.

### IV Oil and after

In the 1920s the heirs of the skilled men, the Labour politicians who had come in with the implosion of the capitalists, took over the imagination of the region. But their great days were already behind them and with a couple of exceptions, John Wheatley [21] and Tom Johnston, they were ineffectual. James Maxton [22] was picturesque, eloquent, decent and lazy: his disaffiliation of the ILP from the Labour Party in 1932 was a disaster.

Maxton's biographer [23] was Gordon Brown, Britain's chancellor [24] and probable next prime minister, whose obsession with fiscal "prudence" was an ominous longer-term result. Johnston was nationalist and imperialist: his successful term as Scottish secretary under Churchill coped

with the economy by further expanding the public sector: necessary at the time, subsequently an unsubtle panacea.

"Red Clydeside [25]" was largely a myth, acquiesced in by a management which had no response to the disaster which the war brought about, and a Labour Party faced with an economic catastrophe beyond its powers, and all but wiped out by Ramsay MacDonald's national government in 1931. Capitalism did no better: in George Blake's novel The Shipbuilders [26] (1935) the boss scuttles off to Wiltshire, leaving his men on the dole. He represented one lost generation; his successor is the entrepreneur who grows his hi-tech company to the point where he can sell it off and go to play golf on the Algarve for ever and ever amen.

In 1970 the country was given the chance to reverse this with the discovery of oil in the North Sea. This produced some astonishing innovations, many of them home-grown, but it schlepped some 30,000 skilled men offshore, weakening manufacture; and the building of the Trident nuclear deterrent [26], based in the Clyde, completed the damage. The John Brown yard at Clydebank, which made the transition to oil work, now awaits rebirth as the site for one of the supermarkets which have all but wiped out native retail enterprise.

What has evolved is an unholy amalgam of state provision as a parking lot for Scotland's problems, plus a surrender before giant commercial concerns like supermarkets and privatised utilities, and the ever-encroaching "fourth sector" of crime. Scotland's drug problem is three times that of continental Europe, with spin-offs and money-laundering to match.

### **V And now for something completely different?**

So where do we go from here? Sheridan's SSP, with its six MSPs at Holyrood (a significant number in a parliament elected by a proportional system) has been effective in securing niche legislation, but its former leader's political isolation has made him a figure no more revolutionary than Maxton; indeed, the SSP was waning even before the drip of press rumour about Sheridan's private life precipitated the leadership crisis of 2004.

The election of the comrades to Holyrood does reflect a real social crisis in the west of Scotland, including workless figures even Gordon Brown [26] can't massage. But a political programme built around classical leftist nostrums and formulae can have only limited impact. Other former lefties – Brown himself, the *Scotsman* journalist George Kerevan, and the Scottish National Party's (SNP's) Mike Russell and Dennis MacLeod (in their book *Grasping the Thistle*) – have banked on the market: the latter seeing this as a means of blowing an encrusted Scottish society open. Fair enough, but ease up on the utopianism, when what's needed is a sober assessment of Scotland's immediate chances.

The SNP's leader Alex Salmond [27], an oil economist by trade, argues that oil still has the key role within the Scottish economy. Although only a third of United Kingdom sector reserves remain, its price per barrel is eight times what it was at the time of the first Holyrood elections of 1999. There is a sound basis for forging a deal with the Norwegians to create a North Sea Opec, conserve the stuff, and use it as the collateral for eco-hi-tech reindustrialisation: renewable energy, vastly improved public transport, technical education - something that can only be achieved through European cooperation.

A glance at any European hi-tech region shows the most salient divergence from Scotland: an intelligent and internationally-aware media. The current state of Scottish politics - Labour's civil war, an improving performance by the SNP, the Conservatives in the doldrums and the SSP imploding – may combine with self-destructive tendencies at the BBC, ITV and NewsCorp to

trigger a long-overdue national inquest, and lay the old ghosts for good. There are nine months to 3 May 2007 and the Holyrood elections. And to the beginnings of national rebirth?

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