

# Radical Options for Scotland & Europe



FOR PUBLIC OWNERSHIP AND DEMOCRATIC CONTROL

June 2023

## SCOTLAND FACING FURTHER GRIM AUSTERITY

### Council Tax Reform Now Urgent

At the end of May Scotland's deputy first minister Shona Robison published the Scottish government's Medium Term Financial Strategy with projections of income and spending for the next four years.

The most optimistic projection for Scottish government income for 2024-25 would allow a 3 percent public sector pay rise and a 2.2 percent increase in workforce growth (across the whole public sector including already grossly understaffed sectors such as the NHS, social care and teaching). The least optimistic estimate was for a 1 percent pay rise and a 0.3 percent workforce growth.

These estimates did not include final figures for current Scottish income tax receipts. The Fraser of Allander commentary published on 2 June warned that these receipts were likely to be below estimate and stressed the urgent need for council tax reform to save local government from further savage cuts.

Such reform was pledged by the SNP government when it took office in 2007. A delegation from COSLA at the end of March 2023 pressed for the need for urgent action on community tax to resolve the funding crisis. It was assured by the new First Minister Humza Yousef that work on this 'was already underway'.

### A more progressive council tax would provide £900m more each year

The Institute for Public Policy Reform Scotland (IPPR) had produced a detailed report in 2021 which had outlined the regressive character of the tax as applied in Scotland and that increases penalised lower valued properties most heavily. It also reported that if the more progressive system currently operating in England was applied a further £900m would be available for local government.

The Institute issued an updated report in January this year outlining the urgency of reform – a call taken up at this year's STUC by UNISON. Since then the STUC's general secretary Roz Foyer has made a new call on the Scottish government to 'urgently reform council tax.'



**Flag of Clydebank Trades Union Council flies outside West Dunbartonshire Council offices as members hold a public protest meeting**

**West Dunbartonshire Council had a £15 million funding shortfall as it set its budget earlier this year, a situation the Labour council leader Martin Rooney described as "the worst position we have ever been in as a council."**

Local trade unionists led by the Trades Union Council argued that the council should adopt a "no cuts" policy to challenge the Scottish government after 15 years of shrinking settlements to councils.

**Only one councillor voted for a 'no cuts budget' motion.**

At the subsequent protest meeting held outside the council headquarters speakers from the council workforce and community organisations exposed the scale of damage to local communities

### Fightback must come from below

CTUC' chairperson Tam Morrison commented. "I was a welfare rights officer for 25 years here, and they've decimated the welfare rights service just when people need it the most. That service alone brought £58m into the area. It's clear that the fightback must come from below.'

**National sovereignty in its full sense – the economic and political freedom to run your country as you democratically choose - has been put firmly back in its box, at least as far as the capitalist elites that run the governments of the British Isles are concerned.**

The radical independence movement that grew out of the 2014 independence referendum, the thousands who joined the Labour Party to elect Jeremy Corbyn and the millions who rejected an EU which had left them behind in the interests of finance capital, all these 'insurrections' have been quelled.

Thanks to the antics of the SNP's petit bourgeois leadership, the prospect of Scottish independence, never mind radical independence, however possible that project might have been, has been buried under political mismanagement and obeisance to the neo-liberal gods of fiscal rectitude.

## **The same gods**

Precisely the same gods who, because of a deceitful leadership campaign and a Labour left at the very least, unclear about its strategy, now dominate the thinking of a Labour leadership likely to take control of the government at Westminster next year.

The masses of people hoping for 'levelling up' as a consequence of Brexit, have found that the Tory leadership are interested only in feeding raw meat to racists through their immigration strategy, while re-instating the shared commitment to a neo-liberal straitjacket through the back door mechanism of the UK-EU trade agreement.

Faced with this context members of Radical Options for Scotland and Europe (ROSE) met in May to consider how we might contribute to putting Scotland in a radical trajectory.

We recognise that it will not be easy.

## **Gordon Brown's A New Britain – minimal increase in powers**

Labour's plans for enhanced devolution as articulated in Gordon Brown's *A New Britain* offers a minimal increase in powers, especially the economic powers necessary to challenge class power in Scotland and, under new leadership, the SNP has shown no inclination to break with the neo-liberal consensus, despite Humza Yousaf's progressive promise in the SNP leadership contest.

## **All Parties, and none, who share our desire for an irreversible shift of wealth and power**

Instead, keeping a close eye on any attempt to allow further EU intrusion into our sovereignty, ROSE will work with community groups, trade unions and socialists in all parties and none who share our desire for an irreversible shift of wealth and power in Scotland in favour of the working class.

**Please join us if you share that objective.**

# **Summary of discussion at ROSE's 2023**

## **Consultation Meeting**



**Opening the meeting our Chair** welcomed those attending and noted the meeting's importance in the current political situation – essentially about how to secure greater unity for Left positions in Scotland at a time of unequalled challenge.

### **ROSE'S Secretary initiated discussion**

It is not an exaggeration to say that politics in Scotland is in a period of profound change and crisis. It is a change that the left has been unable to exploit to its advantage, at least thus far. I hope that this evening we can at least begin to find a way of doing just that.

The failure of the British ruling class to agree how to respond to the end of empire led to the internecine strife among the British elite over EU membership or its 'global Britain' alternative as posed ultimately by Johnston and his allies. Economic crisis has followed economic crisis.

In Scotland the main beneficiary of that has been the SNP. The leadership of the SNP, and here we have to accept they were reflecting the politics of their membership, were no more prepared to challenge the political and economic disparities of capitalism than their British counterparts in the Labour Party. In 2014 referendum the SNP produced a prospectus which offered continued membership of the EU, membership of NATO support for the monarchy and a truncated form of fiscal autonomy by arguing an independent Scotland should continue to use sterling.

### **Impression of Autonomy**

The Labour Party responded to the rise of nationalism by legislating for a devolved Scottish Parliament when it came to power as New Labour in 1997. This was carefully designed to give the impression of autonomy while retaining key powers necessary to actually change the balance of forces in favour of the working class in Scotland.

In this way devolution was supposed to manage the fracturing of Britain. And for a while it seemed to work. The comparative buoyancy of the British economy allowed New Labour to introduce the minimum wage and reduce unemployment.

But all of this collapsed with the banking crisis of 2007/2008. But, rather than been seen as a crisis of the stability of capitalism the Right were able to present it as a crisis of public expenditure. This gave a Tory Lib/Dem coalition control in 2010 leading to years of austerity.

### **Three anti-neo-liberal rebellions**

This fuelled the three anti neo-liberal rebellions of the mid 2010s - the 2014 independence referendum in Scotland, the election of Jeremy Corbyn in 2015 and the 2016 Brexit referendum. They were lightning rods for pent up frustration and yearning for a better Britain, or in Scotland 2014, a better Scotland. And all three suffered from the same critical defect: they were not built on detailed plans for progressive advance and lacked the socialist or even radical social democratic base necessary to exploit what advances had been made.

Consequently, there have been counter-revolutions: in the SNP the increasingly dominant neo-liberal wing insisted on fiscal rectitude as the basis for independence and the right of the Labour Party replaced Corbyn with a ventriloquist's dummy that looks and behaves increasingly like Tony Blair. Brexit of course rather than being an opportunity, for example, to deploy state aid as a mechanism for implementing an industrial strategy, has become a byword for xenophobia.

This has emboldened the Labour right who now seem to feel that even the limited reforms of the Brown commission have to be side-lined in order to ensure the Labour right's belief in the necessity of a UK wide market were national or regional democracy or local democracy does not interfere with the smooth running of the international corporations.

In these circumstances the left has to find a way of maximising unity in order to build a serious opposition to the gathering pace of the corporate take-over. I believe that unity of the left is possible if we can agree a strategy that could be supported by those who ultimately want independence but could support, what for them, would be an interim position. **That common ground could be found in a federal solution which would give the Scottish Parliament the tools its needs now, to defend economic democracy, redistribution of wealth and the pursuit of equality in Scotland.**

**A Left nationalist Councillor** welcomed the meeting and broadly agreed with the summation of current challenges. He was a socialist nationalist. Devolution had led to disappointment. It had failed to devolve key responsibilities such as employment law – and we can now see the consequences of this.

He had long valued ROSE as a unique meeting place for debate and discussion among those wanting to maintain Scotland's radical socialist traditions and to work for unity in the trade union and labour movement around interim objectives. He could accept radical forms of devolution as long as they were not seen as the end of the road. He highlighted land ownership and land use and ownership as a key area where the SNP had failed to act. It was, however, one which was in fact a vital issue for any progressive, socialist advance. It represented a vital resource that ought to be under public ownership if issues of climate change, the housing crisis and economic development were to be tackled. Currently its ownership remained effectively feudal.

The SNP had simply run away from the issue – among many others – and the party was now little more than a tartan version of Fianna Fail and, as in Ireland, was presiding over a process of accelerated corporate take-over screened by a false 'EU' progressivism. There had to be a coherent Left challenge and that was why he endorsed the general objectives of the meeting.

**A member of the executive of a major union** gave her personal take on the current crisis. People desperately wanted decent wages and social services that could meet their needs. How do we get there – and out of the current crisis ?

There were in fact a number of different views of what independence might achieve and how in might do so – as well as issues of constitutional change. We needed a radical vision and the means to get it out into public discourse.

The media don't reflect the Left. There were, however, new opportunities in the current circumstances of heightened trade union mobilisation. However, to start we needed a vision and currently all the alternatives were blurred in the popular mind. Even major unions like her own was not making clear their positions on federalism or independence. That was why she valued this meeting and the continuing work of ROSE as a way of defining that vision.

**A member of the radical socialist left** who had been very active in supporting independence in 2014 stressed the need for a strategic retake of the situation. The last week had seen the electoral defeat of Syriza in Greece and of parallel political forces in Turkey. Both sought to cultivate the belief in EU progressivism – that opportunities existed within its structures for policies that were not subordinate to corporate interests. History had shown that this was not the case.

The reality was one in which the public sector was eroded and a regime of corporate control stabilised. The broader Left needed to accept this reality – otherwise its decline would continue.

In Scotland the Radical Independence movement had campaigned in 2012 to 2014 against the SNP's acceptance of NATO and for economic sovereignty. It now had to be recognised that the SNP could not offer any sort of progressive path. Nor was there going to be a referendum any time soon. Although its prospect remained politically useful to hold together the SNP-Green alliance and also for ALBA, it was a false one and the Left had to escape from its grasp.

Meantime, we had to show how Scotland's productive assets were being stolen. The Freeport jointly endorsed by Westminster and the SNP coalition directly undermined even existing modes of devolution while the Greens had provided cover for the corporate take-over the North Sea wind and wave power. The Left had to rethink its position. The challenges from the Tories, New Labour and the SNP coalition had to be met with a coherent alternative and he hoped ROSE could be part of the process by which this could be developed.

**A member of the Labour Party** stressed the urgency of setting up an anti-neo-liberal front in Scotland. The implosion of the SNP offered the opportunity to do so. Its crisis derived directly from its subservience to big business and failed attempts to conceal this. But this equally applied to other parties such as Labour and the Greens. We needed to expose this in detail.

However, we also had to avoid simply focusing on constitutions and referenda. Any Left advance depended on mobilisation at the base – on strengthening the organisation of working people and developing the potential for class struggle. Nothing could be achieved unless there was class mobilisation on the ground. ROSE needed to take this message forward and develop an anti-neo-liberal programme challenging the main political parties.



**A leading youth member of the Labour Party** agreed with previous comments on Syriza and developments in Turkey. But we also had to confront the consequent danger. The eclipse of the Left project, oriented around a 'progressive' view of the EU, opened the way for the Right. We could not ignore this – in Britain or Scotland. The importance of ROSE was that it could potentially fulfil the role of opening up debate. Today on the Left it was now taboo to make criticisms of NATO, to express any reservations about its role in a war that was polarising and economically devastating Europe. And the EU was again being advanced as a Left cause.

There was, however, now an uptick for some areas of Left politics, in support for public ownership and trade union rights. This needed to be generalised to an understanding of national and international state structures, such as NATO, the EU and the G7. We need to link into what was actually happening in Scotland – to the private looting of the potentially public resources of land, of sea and of wind power, areas for potential public control crucial for the next generation but which on current showing will be wasted.

This is the context for a rise in the populist extreme Right, as at Erskine, which we could not ignore. Migrants are being blamed in a media-inflamed panic. Our response therefore needed to be grounded in local issues and demands – with the work done, for instance, in North Ayrshire Community Wealth Building as an example. ROSE could play an important role. But we had to find ways of giving it a greater profile.

**Full report (including also comments from a Labour councillor and some Trades Union Council officers) on the ROSE website [www.rose-scotland.org](http://www.rose-scotland.org)**

# Threats to World Peace posed by the EU and NATO

During my time as chair of Scottish CND I had the privilege of working with two giants of the Scottish Peace Movement Alan MacKinnon and John Ainslie who are sadly no longer with us. I remember a number of meetings where John and Alan reminded us that NATO was a US led military alliance with a nuclear first strike policy . They were also involved in producing pamphlets which highlighted that the alliance possessed a massive nuclear arsenal including Britain's Trident nuclear weapons system.

On its website NATO currently describes the EU as a unique and essential partner. This is not a surprising description as the two organisations share a majority of members and again according to the NATO website have common values. In January 2023 NATO and EU signed their third declaration confirming continued co/operation between the two bodies .

One of the consequences of this increasing militarisation of the EU is that the bloc's spending on defence passed the eye watering figure of 200 billion euros at the end of 2022. In another development NATO is also strengthening relations with countries in the Indo - Pacific region namely Australia, Japan, South Korea and New Zealand .

According to their website NATO are stepping up political dialogue with these 4 countries in areas such as maritime security and cyberspace. Given that over more than two decades NATO has been involved in wars across the Middle East , Africa and Europe - it is worrying that there now seems to be a focus on the Indo-Pacific region. This has resulted in EU members Germany and France and the U.K. taking part in military exercises which have involved sending warships into the South China Sea.

It is very worrying that the EU seems to be developing ever closer connections with NATO- which increasingly displays behaviour that poses a threat to a peaceful world. It seems to me that in response there is an opportunity for ROSE to put forward imaginative and peaceful policies on security issues.

Advocating the case for a more democratic United Nations and more support for the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe would be useful starting points.

**Arthur West Former Chair Scottish CND**

## AFFILIATE TO ROSE

Individual membership is £5; local organisation £10; Scottish level organisation £50

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

Fee \_\_\_\_\_

**Cheques payable to ROSE: Jim McDaid, 41 Craufurd Ave, West Kilbride KA23 9DP**

*Current affiliates include Scottish Unite, Unison and RMT and Trades Union Councils for Glasgow, Dundee, West Lothian, Mid Lothian, Fife, North Ayrshire, Dumfries, Clydebank and Kilmarnock & Loudon. Vice Presidents include Elaine Smith MSP, former Labour MEP Alex Smith and former deputy leader of the SNP Jim Sillars.*

## When is a recession not a recession ? asks Freida Park

The answer to the above appears to be when it's a Eurozone recession and it is small, what politicians have taken to calling a technical recession. Previously the EU's statistics office had predicted that it would just manage to avoid recession, however, in both the last two quarters the Eurozone economy shrank by 0.1% - that is to say a recession.

The EU has other economic difficulties, including inflation which varies a lot from country to country, but overall is sitting at 6.1% and interest rates being hiked by the European Central Bank which is now gloomier than it was about both inflation and growth in the zone.

The impact of the war in Ukraine, such as rising fuel costs, and other economic difficulties are felt first and foremost by EU working families and where, as in Britain, there have been widespread strikes over pay and in France the massive protests against Macron's pension reforms.

There will be more pain for the peoples of the EU to come strict fiscal rules are set to return, having been eased during the pandemic and subsidies on fuel are wound down.

The EU's notorious Stability and Growth pact is the set of rules it imposes on member countries dictating their budget deficits and allowing it to intervene in their economies demanding changes to meet its tight targets, including changes to pensions and privatisation of state-owned assets.

Negotiations are now underway to reimpose the pact after it was loosened to prevent countries' economies from collapsing and to support people through the period of lockdown during the Covid pandemic when many were laid off.

As ever Germany is leading the charge for strict financial discipline. This is despite the fact that it has a new government, lead by the Social Democrats and including the Greens in prominent positions. Others, like France and Italy would prefer more flexibility in the rules and negotiations are currently at an impasse. The German finance minister wants heavily indebted countries to reduce their debt to GDP ration by 1% per year and less indebted ones by 0.5% which would represent a hefty cut. With governments also under pressure to increase military spending, provide arms for Ukraine and support Ukrainian refugees these cuts would potentially have to fall on other services.

There will be agreement at some point and even if the hawkish Germans have to back down the principle will be back in place with Brussels being able to dictate to individual governments how they manage their budgets and to impose neo-liberalism and austerity on the people of the EU.

Political tensions remain within the EU round the war in Ukraine and the bloc's relationship to China. Emanuel Macron continues to hold out against totally following the US line. He recently visited China and France is now objecting to a plan to open a NATO office in Japan. It would be the first such office in the Indo-Pacific region.

**ROSE holds regular monthly meetings by zoom open to all those who support its objectives. It welcomes new members.** If you want to be involved, contact the joint secretary, Vince Mills email [vp Mills@outlook.com](mailto:vp Mills@outlook.com),

**ROSE WEBSITE <https://www.rose-scotland.org>**

**This contains copies of briefings, podcasts and videos of meetings**