

# TESS

A Journal of Degrowth in Scotland

Issue 3 | Autumn 2021



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LESS IS A JOURNAL on degrowth, radical sufficiency and decolonisation in Scotland.

LESS questions and challenges dominant narratives about what economic progress means in Scotland, and sketches out alternative visions. The focus is on collective and democratic solutions to sustaining livelihoods that meet people’s needs while rising to the threats of climate change, ecocide and mass

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extinction, inequality, racism and the far right, and the interconnected oppressive and extractivist logic and mechanisms that feed all of those.

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LESS is produced by the Enough! Collective. Find out more at [enough.scot](http://enough.scot) or [@enoughscot](https://www.instagram.com/enoughscot). Contact us on [less@enough.scot](mailto:less@enough.scot). All work published in LESS is licensed as creative commons (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 – [creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/)) and can be freely reproduced and amended for non-commercial purposes. LESS is edited by Mike Small, Svenja Meyerricks, Luke Devlin and Mairi McFadyen. Design and illustration above by Stewart Bremner. Cover and illustrations on pages 2-3 by Stewart Bremner.

# DEGROWTH AND DECOLONISATION IN THE RED ZONE

**Y**OUR VISION OF our country may be an idealised one of lochs brimming with salmon and glens filled with deer, but in reality we're a petro-chemical economy being held ransom by the British State. Our most famous icons and exports – our salmon and deer and grouse – are really symbols of a country disfigured by landed power. We remain a semi-feudal nation with one of the most unequal distributions of land ownership in the world.

In Gaelic, Glasgow means 'Dear Green Place', but Glasgow was also known from the 19th century as the Second City of the Empire, a city that became synonymous with massive

**Hello world. Welcome to Glasgow. Welcome to Scotland. We are drawing on Glasgow's radical past to inject hope and urgency into the moribund COP process.**

expansion, global trade, industry, invention, and shipbuilding.

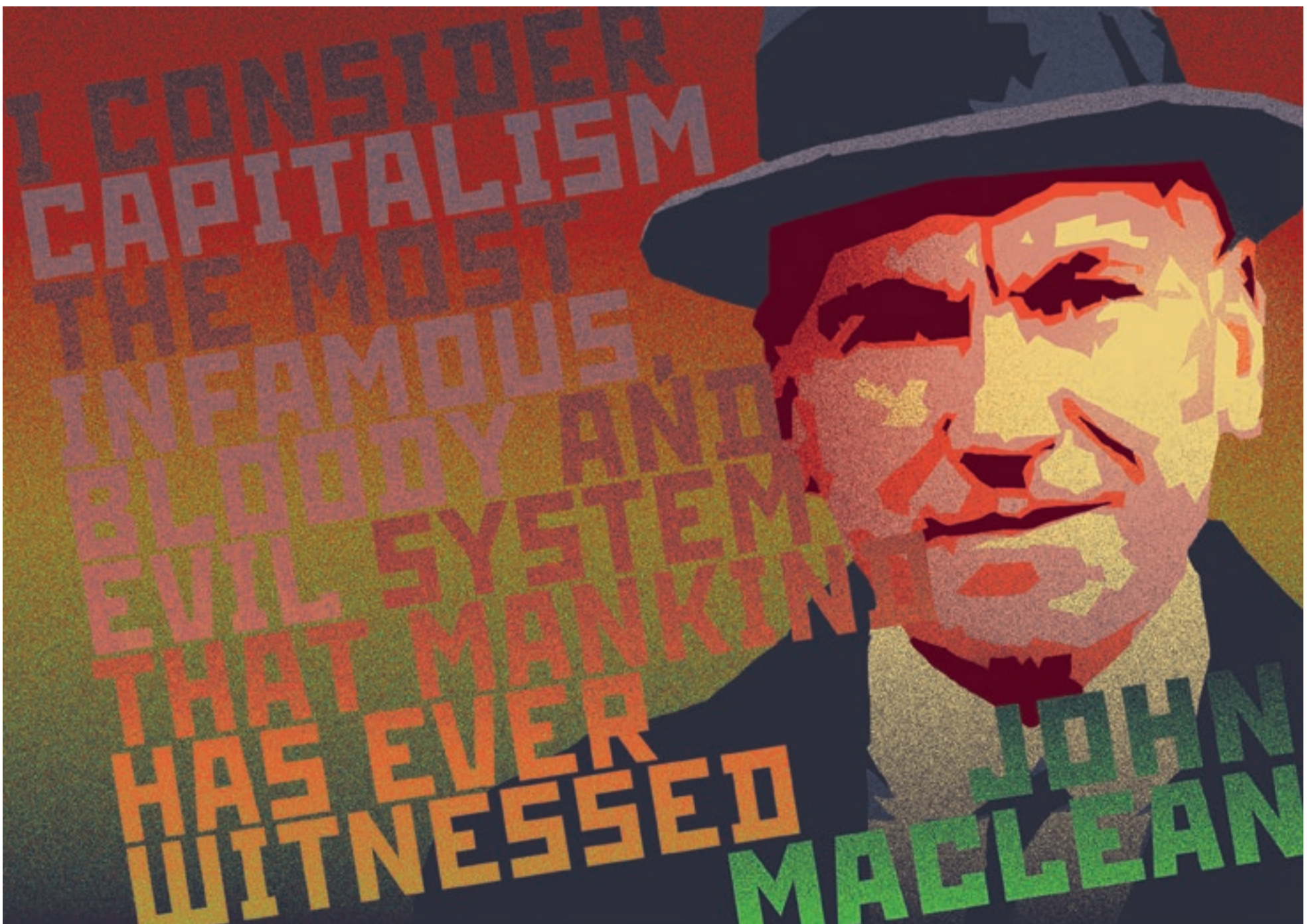
For almost 200 years, the statue of the celebrated Scottish inventor and engineer James Watt has stood in George Square. Every schoolchild is taught about the invention of the steam engine in 1776, which was fundamental to the changes brought by the Industrial Revolution across the world. What's less well known is that Watt's father was a slave trader, a colonial merchant who subsidised his son. The development of the

steam engine was funded by slavery. Watt himself was involved in colonial commerce and played a direct role in the trafficking of enslaved people.

With Glasgow playing host to the COP in 2021, we have historical symmetry. It's more of a loop than a continuum; as the world faces climate catastrophe, the same city that was pivotal in the Industrial Revolution, colonisation, and Empire is the city that must now be the pivot towards decolonisation and degrowth.

Mirroring the challenge

facing humanity itself, the city of Glasgow needs to find ways to move beyond the old story that it has become defined by. This is not just about moving beyond an industrial legacy and identity; it's about moving beyond a history of violence and ongoing destruction. Like the abandoned coalfields that pockmark Fife and Ayrshire, the empty docks that still line the Clyde speak to communities left to mass unemployment and intergenerational trauma. For Glasgow, and for the rest of us, degrowth is about finding ways of living and being beyond our obsession with productivity and consumption and GDP. It's about working towards a radical >>





## BEING HUMAN

IF, AS THE IPCC stated: “All pathways begin now and involve rapid and unprecedented social transformation”, then Glasgow has a radical political history to inspire the movement.

Glasgow is not just a city of Empire built on exploitation; it is also a city built on struggle. Whether it's Mary Barbour's rent strikes or John Maclean and Red Clydeside in the early 20th century, Jimmy Reid and the Upper Clyde Shipbuilders of 1971, the anti-Polaris and CND movement, the Anti-Poll Tax Campaign, the anti-apartheid movement, Pollok Free State in the 1990s, the Kenmure Street protest of 2021 or the countless unsung pockets of radical and inspired action in the communities that make up the fabric of the city, there is much to learn from Glasgow's radical past.

Other sources of local inspiration include Jimmy Reid's Rectorial Address to the University of Glasgow in 1972, a speech that has had reverberations and resonance down the years. He could be speaking to us directly today:

***“Let me right at the outset define what I mean by alienation. It is the cry of men who feel themselves the victims of blind economic forces beyond their control. It is the frustration of ordinary people excluded from the processes of decision making. The feeling of despair and hopelessness that pervades people who feel with justification that they have no real say in shaping or determining their own destinies. [...] Reject these attitudes. Reject the values and false morality that underlie these attitudes. A rat race is for rats. We're not rats. We're human beings.”***

Some of the critique of the climate crisis turns on humanity; claiming, with the spectre of ecofascism looming, that “We humans are the problem.”. The answer for Reid is not less humanity but less capitalism. The power structures that have emerged threaten and undermine our hard won democratic rights. His words echo down the ages:

***“Government by the people for the people becomes meaningless unless it includes major economic decision making by the people for the people. This is not simply an economic matter. In essence it is an ethical and moral question, for whoever takes the important economic***

transformation of our society to one which serves a new function: supporting the flourishing and sustaining of life.

The path towards this transformation or ‘transition’ is faint and hard to make out. Any movement of change left to market forces motivated by profits and constrained within the economics of globalisation – a political and economic ideology based on exploitative practices towards people, land, and nature – will follow the same inevitable path to destruction.

After a year in the trauma of the pandemic, the climate crisis came to Europe. Extreme weather visited the Global North with an unrecognisable summer of flooding, wildfires, and extreme heat. Even the most complacent were woken from their slumbers to confront a present and future of climate emergency that can no longer be ignored.

We are heading full steam into a world of fossil-fuel expansion and mass extinction of species,

including our own. As the IPCC report stated, we are living in “code red for humanity: the alarm bells are deafening, and the evidence is irrefutable.”

Yet, incredibly, the Prime Minister – of the UK government Scotland did not elect – is preparing to sign off on a new drilling permit at Cambo oilfield, west of Shetland.<sup>1</sup> If approved, Cambo would produce 170m barrels of oil and would deepen the climate crisis for decades to come.<sup>2</sup> It is a staggeringly backward move, an exercise in futility and, ultimately, a crime against humanity. In Scotland, we don't have full democratic control over our future path, and in this situation there is an echo of the climate predicament. In a world where greenwash and disinformation dominate, it's easy to feel alienated and see only the futility of the process.

The COP26 Coalition joined calls for the summit's postponement, stating:

***“As the clock ticks on this crucial decade, rich countries must commit to doing their fair share of climate action, cutting emissions to zero and paying their carbon debt to the global South. This is the bare minimum needed to pave the way for a successful COP26, yet the COP Presidency is far from showing such leadership [...] From climate to Covid the UK has shown it is willing to sacrifice those worst off to shore up huge profits for the few.”<sup>3</sup>***

The challenge is not to be consumed by the huge gravitational pull and distraction of COP – its hype, its false hope, its unreality, its greenwashed credentials and stage-managed accords. The challenge is to organise within communities and resist the police state, to speak the truth, to cultivate outrage, to create a rupture, to challenge inevitability, and to imagine, articulate, and build different futures. Our humanity and our home is under threat.

***decisions in society ipso facto determines the social priorities of that society.”***

Our global economy is structured so that disproportionate, dangerous, and unprecedented amounts of wealth and power are centralised and held by the people and multinational corporations involved in excessive extractive industries driving climate breakdown and ecosystem collapse. They are taking decisions which are not in the interests of you, me, or the billions of people and diverse ecosystems on this planet. In degrowth, we have an opportunity to transfer power away from those bodies towards more democratic structures and processes that centre care and life-sustaining work.

We need to shift towards an economy away from growth-at-any-cost to an economy that is feminist in the sense of the late Scottish economist Ailsa Mackay<sup>4</sup> and as outlined by Maria Mies<sup>5</sup>:

***“The feminist project is basically an anarchist movement which does not want to replace one (male) power elite by another (female) power elite, but which wants to build up a non-hierarchical, non-centralised society where no elite lives off exploitation and dominance over others.”***

We also need new mechanisms to sustainably ‘govern the commons’, as sketched out by Elinor Ostrom<sup>6</sup> – which include restoring our oceans and the atmosphere in service of the greater good. Any framework for transitioning to an alternative economic system that does not account for the massive global

restructuring of power relations needed – and which does not understand this as a political project – will not deliver the transformation that is needed for everyone – human and more-than-human – to live well and flourish on the planet we call home.

We present to you LESS’s ‘Code Red’ issue not simply as a response to the COP, but as a space for voices from the centre to the margins of the struggle for climate justice, degrowth, and decolonisation. Benjamin Brown makes the case for shutting down the Mossmorran Natural Gas Liquids plant in Fife. Paul Routledge, Gehan Macleod, and David Lees write about the GalGael Free State as an autonomous zone near the ‘blue zone’ where climate talks are talking place. Luke Devlin interviews Craig Bryce about rebel DIY housebuilding and the autonomy that comes with

building collectives. Rhyddian Knight interviews David Blair about the ark he built on the Cowal peninsula to highlight the plight of coastal communities. Peter Kitelo Chongeywo of the Ogiek Indigenous Forest Peoples of Mount Elgon, Kenya, sees climate change activism in the UK as fighting for all our tomorrows. Kate Chambers writes about the need to decouple social mobility from resource consumption. Mark Langdon reflects on education for transformation as a crucial tool in a time of ecological and social crisis. Svenja Meyerricks interviews climate justice activist Nomalizo Xhoma in Johannesburg about the COP and community struggles in South Africa. Catriona Spaven-Donn argues for commons food systems that are grounded in collaborative relationships between plants and fungi. And, finally, Vishwam Heckert reflects

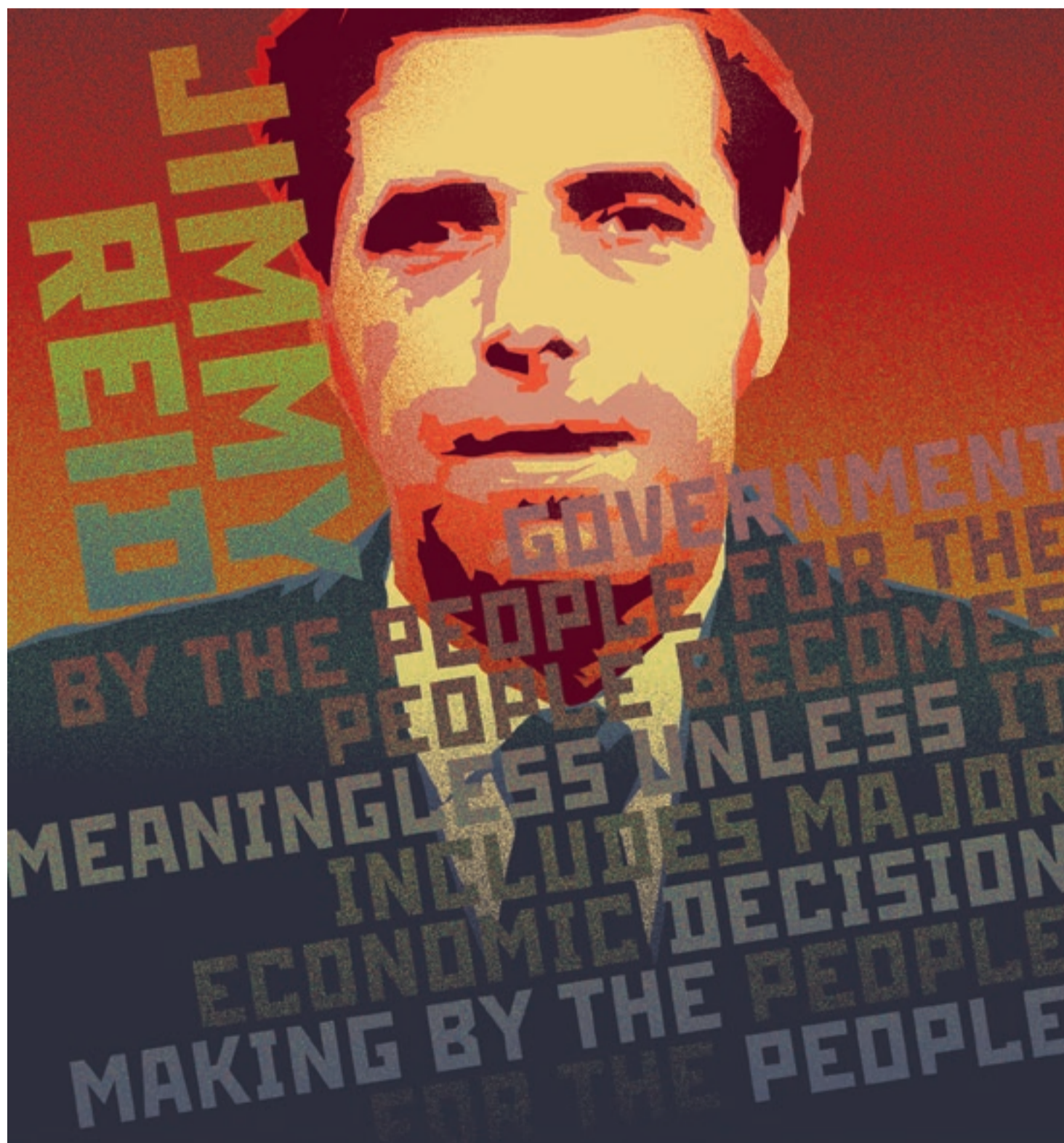
on the need to unlearn Empire and abstraction and disconnection by unlearning the embodied and psychic habit of separating ‘us’ and ‘them’ or ‘me’ from the ‘world’.

The Dear Green Place is the perfect venue for COP, where all the contradictions and complexities of our past, present, and possible futures are laid bare. Glasgow is a site of both colonisation and decolonisation, imperialism and anti-imperialism. It is a city disfigured by poverty and scarred by violence, exploitation, and trauma. It is also a city of resistance, hospitality, political radicalism, and hope. From Glasgow, we need to forge a world where we are no longer “the victims of blind economic forces beyond our control.”<sup>7</sup> The choice is endless growth of global capital or life on earth.

It’s a choice we are each going to have to keep fighting for every day. ■

**Notes**

- 1 Oliver Wright (2021, 13 September) ‘Boris Johnson to support more North Sea drilling despite climate pledge’, *The Times*. Available at: [thetimes.co.uk/article/boris-johnson-to-support-more-north-sea-drilling-despite-climate-pledge-bpczs388g](https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/boris-johnson-to-support-more-north-sea-drilling-despite-climate-pledge-bpczs388g)
- 2 #StopCambo: [stopcambo.org.uk/why-stop-cambo](https://stopcambo.org.uk/why-stop-cambo)
- 3 COP26 Coalition Political Statement. Available at: [cop26coalition.org/resource/cop26-coalition-joins-international-call-for-cop26-to-be-postponed-cop26-coalition-political-statement/](https://cop26coalition.org/resource/cop26-coalition-joins-international-call-for-cop26-to-be-postponed-cop26-coalition-political-statement/)
- 4 See: Jim Campbell & Morag Gillespie (eds.) (2016) *Feminist Economics and Public Policy: Reflections on the work and impact of Ailsa McKay*. London: Routledge.
- 5 Maria Mies (1986) *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale: Women in the International Division of Labour*. London: Zed Books. (2014, p.37)
- 6 Elinor Ostrom (1990) *Governing the Commons. The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- 7 Maree Todd MSP (2016, 5 January) Letter, *Ullapool News*. Available at: [facebook.com/MareeToddMSP/posts/1865464317013447](https://facebook.com/MareeToddMSP/posts/1865464317013447)



# DISMANTLING SCOTLAND'S PETRO-INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX: LESSONS FROM MOSSMORRAN

**Decarbonise, democratise, decolonise, decommodify. This is the mantra we must adopt in the year of COP26, argues Benjamin Brown. Nowhere is this more true than for Mossmorran, a scar on Scotland's environmental conscience.**

**Photos by Alan McCreddie.**

*Tae conclude ma tale I'm gey sick o their lees,  
The truth is they juist dae whatever they please,  
When it disnae blaw up we're tae faa on our knees,  
Tae gie thanks tae the Mossmorran Gaffer!*

– From The Mossmorran Gaffer by  
Wullie Hershaw<sup>1</sup>

**A** TOWERING JUMBLE OF metallic pipes and chimneys, bathed in smoke, rises up from the Fife landscape. This industrial monolith is a cavernous presence, standing tall in an uneasy truce with gorse-strewn fields that surround it. Intermittently, the site is lit up by flares burning off excess gas. These can burn so bright that they are visible from Edinburgh, over twenty miles away across the Firth of Forth. But it is up-close that the presence of this place can be felt most keenly. The incessant, whirring din of industrial machinery; the unpleasant smell that permeates the air around it.

This is the Mossmorran petrochemical complex, processing gas from the North Sea into ethylene and other chemical products. Mossmorran refers to both the natural gas and

liquids (NGL) plant operated by Shell, and Exxonmobil's ethylene plant that sits alongside it. Since its construction in 1985, Mossmorran has seen opposition from a sizeable chunk of Fife residents unconvinced that the jobs associated with the plants (180 employees plus 50 contractors at the ethylene plant, according to Exxonmobil<sup>2</sup>; numbers for Shell's NGL plant are not publicly available) are a price worth paying for year upon year of light, air, and noise pollution. Symptoms reported include heightened anxiety, itchy throats, asthma, headaches and migraines, and sleepless nights from light and noise disruption caused by flaring.

Local campaigners have held protests, conducted social impact mapping<sup>3</sup>, and submitted over 900 complaints<sup>4</sup> about the environmental and health impacts of the plants. This has delivered some wins: Shell UK Limited and Exxonmobil Chemical Limited have both been fined by the Scottish Environmental Protection Agency (SEPA) for breaching environmental regulations at the site. In May 2019, residents pushed for the regional council to "commission an independent expert study of the environmental, social and health impacts on the surrounding communities".<sup>5</sup> A council motion was subsequently passed which includes a commitment to "seek discussions with the Scottish and UK Governments, the companies and trade unions regarding the long term future of the plant and a possible strategy for its decommissioning".

This is not mere NIMBYism. Although local disruption and health concerns may have animated initial grievances, campaigners increasingly join the dots between climate breakdown and Mossmorran, which boasts the unenviable position of being the third largest polluter<sup>6</sup> in Scotland. Indeed, Exxonmobil's promise to install a new ground flare tip has been met with derision. Protests stubbornly continued throughout the pandemic (both online and ➤

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and Mossmorran"*



socially distanced), and the cosmetic solutions put forward have failed to mute public criticism. At the end of July, as restrictions eased, local campaigners welcomed over 100 climate activists from across Scotland, who converged in a nondescript field close to Mossmorran as part of an 'Action Weekend' organised by Climate Camp Scotland and local group Actions Speak Louder Than Words. The camp was planned as part of a coordinated wave of actions in over 20 countries against the use of fossil gas,<sup>7</sup> and to mobilise action against Scotland's fossil fuel infrastructure.

From activists standing against the Torness nuclear power station near Dunbar in 1979,<sup>8</sup> to the occupation of Mainhill wood to prevent opencast coal mining in 2009,<sup>9</sup> Scotland has a strong tradition of using protest camps to block environmental harm. Yet the pandemic created many challenges, with activist energy understandably turning to public health, mutual aid, and care over much of the past year and a half. Organisers scaled back their original vision, abandoning plans for an Ende Gelaende<sup>10</sup> style mass direct action so as to prioritise covid safety<sup>11</sup> and create a space for the Scottish climate movement to regroup after sixteen months of dormancy.

The organising process that led up to this was not always easy. Familiar patterns of burnout, uneven burdens of labour, and miscommunication were compounded by the limitations of mostly online meetings and other constraints imposed by the pandemic. Organising fell short of ambitions to ensure inclusivity, causing upset to people with disabilities in the run-up to the camp. Efforts were made to remedy this, but it exposed shortcomings that must be overcome for any intersectional climate movement.

However, relationships of trust were gradually built between local campaigners and climate camp organisers. As covid restrictions loosened, outreach stalls in Fife created opportunities for learning, discussion, and dialogue with the community. The climate camp itself brought together activists from across Scotland: Fife, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Dundee, Stirling, Argyll. The weekend was tightly packed with a vibrant programme of workshops and action planning, culminating with a public assembly at the gates of Mossmorran. Protesters expressed their discontent loudly, noisily, and passionately: "Clean Gas is a Dirty Lie! Just Transition Now! Polluters Out!"

A movement was rising.

THE COP26 (UN Climate Change Conference) circus arrives in Glasgow this November. "Just Transition"<sup>12</sup> is now centre stage in national policy-making under Scotland's new SNP-Green collaborative government, while UK PM Boris Johnson has recently sought to bolster climate credentials by announcing that fossil fuels will be eliminated from the UK's electricity supply by 2035.<sup>13</sup> Yet talk comes easy, and consensus over the exact meaning of what this transition should entail remains to be determined. SNP proposals for a £26 million Energy Transition Zone near Aberdeen are a far cry from the priorities of local residents, who are concerned the project will transform one of the area's last green spaces into another industrial site<sup>14</sup>, and politicians of

*"These are the same companies who have for years have funded climate denial, committed human rights abuses, and contaminated air, land, and seas across the world."*

all stripes remain captivated by false solutions such as carbon offsets,<sup>15</sup> blue hydrogen,<sup>16</sup> and Bioenergy with Carbon Capture and Storage.<sup>17</sup> Concerns remain that the second iteration of the Scottish Government's Just Transition Commission will privilege business, while marginalising the voices of trade unions and local communities. Meanwhile, Britain's gas crisis has exposed how reliant the economy continues to be on gas, and hikes to energy bills threaten to plunge thousands into fuel poverty.

In Fife's post-industrial towns of Cowdenbeath and Lochgelly, where the ghosts of once-booming collieries loom large over the landscape, a Green Industrial Revolution holds the promise of economic renewal. Yet the region's own recent history speaks to the challenges of realising this reality: the BiFab debacle, in which fabrication yards in Burntisland (just a few miles from Mossmorran) lost out on construction contracts for Scotland's offshore wind industry to companies overseas (relying on cheapened Indonesian labour<sup>18</sup>), was a painful reminder that the government cannot rely on the private sector to deliver green jobs of its own volition. Coordinated public investment and active state intervention will be vital to ensure the creation of secure, well paid, unionised jobs in low carbon industries.

Navigating a socially and environmentally just transition, that can bring prosperity to economically deprived regions in Scotland without relying on endless extractivism and

*"From activists standing against the Torness nuclear power station near Dunbar in 1979, to the occupation of Mainhill wood to prevent opencast coal mining in 2009, Scotland has a strong tradition of using protest camps to block environmental harm."*

exploitative supply chains, is a fraught process. It will not be easy. Yet one thing is certain: any 'Just Transition' worth its salt will not be determined by Shell or Exxonmobil, whatever superficial aspiration to "net zero emissions"<sup>19</sup> they embrace. These are the same companies who have for years have funded climate denial, committed human rights abuses, and contaminated air, land, and seas across the world. From Indonesia to Nigeria, they are the perpetrators of carbon colonialism and fossil fuel capitalism.<sup>20</sup> Rather than banking on industry "partnership" to deliver the change we need, a true "Just Transition" requires public participation, far-sighted planning, and full democratisation of the energy sector. To decarbonise at the speed and scale required, public ownership must triumph over market logic and the race to generate profits.

The climate camp stimulated a process of visioning for our own collective future. This extended beyond conventional definitions of "Just Transition", to embrace much more expansive and holistic ideas about how we live and work together. Ultimately, it recognised that we cannot simply demand 'green jobs'. We need to redesign the basic principles around which our economy operates. As Kathi Weeks highlights, "the wage relation generates not just income and capital, but disciplined individuals, governable subjects, worthy citizens, and responsible family members."<sup>21</sup> Class antagonisms remain under capitalism, even if it adopts a green veneer, and if we want to achieve true social and ecological flourishing, we must look to ways of working less, consuming less, and dismantling the social, racial, and gender hierarchies that pit all of us against each other.

Decarbonise, democratise, decolonise, decommodify – looking forward into the 2020s, this should be the mantra that guides us. Zero carbon, publicly owned energy systems. Free public transport. Universal Basic Services. Debt cancellation, climate reparations, and a radical redistribution of wealth and power from corporations to communities.

From record-breaking floods to devastating wildfires<sup>22</sup>, the climate crisis is intensifying. The dire situation we find ourselves in at just 1°C of global heating is a warning of what awaits us without radical action. There are many uphill struggles, but it's important to recognise how far we've come. Successful direct action campaigns against coal and fracking have made support for those industries untenable in the UK. Pressure from youth activists has prompted Nicola Sturgeon to ditch 'maximum economic recovery of North Sea oil and gas' in favour of 'the fastest possible just transition'.<sup>23</sup>

While the struggle at Mossmorran is far from won, it illuminates how we must bend the political calculations that will shape our collective future. To dismantle Scotland's petro-industrial complex and build a world that is not just liveable but desirable, we need to go beyond resistance. We need to open up political space for degrowth and ecosocialist ideas to become the new 'common sense'. As the late anthropologist David Graeber reminds us: "the ultimate, hidden truth of the world is that it is something that we make, and could just as easily make differently."<sup>24</sup> It's time: let's build the future we deserve. ■



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# THE CUCHUBAL AND THE COMMONS: SHARING CIRCLES, FOOD SOVEREIGNTY AND ORGANISING BIOREGIONALLY

**Globalised industrial food systems are unsustainable – huge carbon emissions, soil degradation, unsafe and unethical intensive livestock farming, and brittle supply chains. What can future-proof food systems look like in Scotland? Catriona Spaven-Donn and Diana Garduño Jiménez weave together threads of food sovereignty activism. Illustration by Tarneem Al Mousawi.**

**D**EGROWTH IS A radical reimagining of the kind of society we need to create in order to protect our future. When extractivist economic and political systems have changed the very geology of our Earth and led us into the Anthropocene's age of extinction, we clearly do need a different story.

In bringing together the threads of that story, we must weave cross-cultural thinking and traditional ecological knowledge into the future vision... for what is future is also what has passed.

As we reclaim, reimagine, and re-envision, we also question. Doubt creeps in about things we were told as fact – such as Darwinian theories of competition and the widely accepted idea that we need to compete to stay alive and thrive; that our world rewards the survival of the fittest. Suzanne Simard, renowned ecologist and author of *Finding the Mother Tree: Uncovering the Wisdom and Intelligence of the Forest*, describes her first encounter with mycorrhizal fungus roots and their two-way exchange of soil nutrients and photosynthesised sugars.<sup>1</sup> She realises that the mutualism of this relationship calls into question the idea that competition is essential to evolution and, rather, suggests that co-operation is key. She later writes about the symbiotic nature and diversity of the forest floor:

*“I have come full circle to stumble onto some of the Indigenous ideals: Diversity matters. And everything in the universe is connected – between the forests and the prairies, the land and the water, the sky and the soil, the spirits and the living, the people and all other creatures.” (p.283)*

Robin Wall Kimmerer, scientist and enrolled member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, illustrates the same principle of reciprocity in *Braiding Sweetgrass*<sup>2</sup> through the indigenous agricultural system of the *milpa* or Three Sisters, the complementary planting together of starch-rich corn, nitrogen-fixing bean, and high-vitamin squash:

*“The Three Sisters offer us a new metaphor for an emerging relationship between indigenous*

*knowledge and Western science, both of which are rooted in the earth. I think of the corn as traditional ecological knowledge, the physical and spiritual framework that can guide the curious bean of science, which twines like a double helix. The squash creates the ethical habitat for coexistence and mutual flourishing. I envision a time when the intellectual monoculture of science will be replaced with a polyculture of complementary knowledges. And so all may be fed.” (p.139)*

When 80% of global arable land is industrial monoculture and 75% of world food crop biodiversity has been lost,<sup>3</sup> all being fed is no small thing. If we are to protect the diversity of our food systems and cultural identities, a shift in our structures of organisation is also imperative. Rather than a focus on colonial national borders, why do we not re-engage with the natural boundaries of rivers and mountains and consider what is possible within our own watersheds? In the context of a just transition to a world of radical sufficiency, this means organising bioregionally – relocating our economies, shortening our supply chains, and living in harmony with the land around us.

Bioregionalism is a different and yet familiar story, an ancestral story of collective wellbeing and ecological approaches. Organising bioregionally is part of the process of achieving self-sufficiency through the co-operation, mutualism, and symbiosis that Simard and Wall Kimmerer suggest.

In Scotland, mycorrhizal networks of food growers and community gardens are flourishing, creating mutually beneficial relationships for people and planet. We have seen that in the context of Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic, people are paying more attention to food sovereignty, access to local produce, and farmers' livelihoods. Is this the beginning of a paradigm shift towards sustainable and regenerative relationships with food and its production?

Abi Mordin, co-founder of Glasgow's Community Food Network,<sup>4</sup> calls for co-ordinated collective action in the face of COVID-19, Brexit, and climate change and

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their impacts on our food system. Along with a burgeoning network of grassroots food growers, she is working towards the diversification of our food production to create community resilience, food security, and affordable and healthy food for those who need it most.

The Scottish Communities Climate Action Network<sup>5</sup> is also working to implement local solutions and a vibrant system of small-scale local democracy, while encouraging an abundance of local food growers and producers everywhere, including city centres, abandoned

land, and temporary spaces. This vision includes the transmission and celebration of cross-generational knowledge exchange.

Similarly, Nourish Scotland<sup>6</sup> works for a fair, healthy, and sustainable food system that truly values nature and people. Their Fork to Farm Dialogues are locally-led conversations focused on building trust and relationships between primary food producers and local decision-makers. The dialogues aim to bring farmers' voices to the fore in the discussions around food systems, agriculture, just transition, and climate change. The Global Fork to Farm Dialogue will take place at COP26, bringing together 100 local government representatives with 100 practising farmers. The dialogues have so far engaged people from Mexico, Scotland, Belgium, Ecuador, Indonesia, Nigeria, and Tanzania. Ancestrality and plurality have been recurring themes of the dialogues. While Mexican participants have re-learned the *milpa* food system that Wall Kimmerer discusses, Scottish participants have also reconnected with the past in order to look to the future.

For one of the Scottish Fork to Farm participants, the Highland Good Food Partnership, the creation of a sustainable, local food system also involves the possibility of reviving the 'shieling system'. In his article, 'Ancient Futures for Highland Hills: Reinventing the Shielings', Col Gordon explains the shielings as a system in which cattle were herded from low-lying glens and woodlands to graze up in the mountain pastures during the summer months. This seasonal change also marked cultural festivals, local storytelling and song traditions. Gordon comments that "despite such a harsh environment, historically the native Highlanders carved out indigenous systems of subsistence that were perfectly balanced to their surroundings. Broadly speaking, these were very elegant,

efficient and productive and operated within the means of the local ecologies."<sup>7</sup>

With the introduction of sheep during the Clearances, the land quality deteriorated and native woodland was reduced at a much more rapid rate. Upland fertility encouraged by the shielings was degraded by the year-round presence of sheep and deer. Gordon suggests that a reintroduction of the shielings system, or an ancient future for Highland hills, could allow for local cheese and meat production as well as rewilding and agroforestry.

In Scotland, while we undeniably have a meaningful relationship with land and sea, colonial patterns of land ownership and the current pro-growth agenda of oil extraction, rapid urbanisation, and increasing consumption entail the use and abuse of nature, rather than an approach that integrates the health of humanity with the health of the planet.

What, then, is our recourse to living holistically and sustainably with and for nature?

The concept of the Commons exists across cultures. Enough! Scotland defines the Commons

*“In the context of a just transition to a world of radical sufficiency, this means organising bioregionally – relocating our economies, shortening our supply chains, and living in harmony with the land around us. Bioregionalism is a different and yet familiar story, an ancestral story of collective wellbeing and ecological approaches.”*

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*“Holistic agroecological food systems require a decolonial approach that is circular, decentralised, collective, collaborative, autonomous, and include ancestral wisdoms.”*

as “that which we all share that should be nurtured in the present and passed on, undiminished, to future generations. We might think of reclaiming the Commons as reclaiming our past and our future.” In the Maya K’iche language, the *cuchubal* means “we all contribute.” In Mayan communities throughout Central America, the tradition of the *cuchubal* entails monthly contributions to a common pool. Historically, this meant each family provided a different foodstuff – corn, black bean, squash – so all were provided for. Women led the process. Now, it usually involves the exchange of money as part of a microfinance sharing circle. Sharing circles, then, function like mycorrhizal networks; interconnected and interdependent groups of mutual exchange that act locally in order to ensure the health of the whole. The co-operation and collectivism of the *cuchubal* reflects the Commons and its reclamation of our past and future.

In Arturo Escobar’s book, *Designs for the Pluriverse: Radical Interdependence, Autonomy and the Making of Worlds*,<sup>8</sup> he suggests that ancestrality is the basis for autonomy. Ancestrality is an energising connection that people have to land through the knowledge that it was inhabited and cared for by their ancestors. Crucially, “far from being an intransigent attachment to the past, ancestrality stems from a living memory directly connected to the ability to envision a different future” (p.71).

Ancestrality acknowledges that other worlds exist and are possible. Wall Kimmerer mentions a “polyculture of complementary knowledges”, while Escobar defines the “pluriverse” as a plurality of stories that weave together both

interdependence and autonomy. This diversity of cultures, identities, languages, food systems, and cosmovisions reflects the Zapatista decolonial, anti-capitalist, agroecologist, and equitable social theory of *un mundo donde quepan muchos mundos* – “a world where many worlds fit.” Zapatistas say that this ideology serves as a bridge to cross to the other side, to build a better world – a new world. Radical transformation involves a horizontalised system of mutual aid and reciprocal relations. It involves constructing, not destroying; to serve others, not oneself; to work from below, not supplant from above.

A new world does not entail invention of a new set of stories. It necessitates the revisiting of ancestrality and autonomy in order to achieve a world of many worlds, a world of complementary knowledges and mycorrhizal networks. Decoloniality moves us away from the notion that there is one single story and reinstates a celebration of diverse ways of living in and interacting with the world around us. While colonial forces imposed one single form of living, decolonial ideas encourage a plurality of co-existences; a community grounded in the celebration of difference.

Robin Wall Kimmerer writes that while humans can’t photosynthesise and create gifts through air, light, and water – we do possess language as “an act of reciprocity with the living land. Words to remember old stories, words to tell new ones, stories that bring science and spirit back together to nurture our becoming people made of corn” (p.347). In the Mayan sacred text, the *Popul Vuh*, people are born from corn, which in turn is made out of all four elements of earth, air, fire, and water.

***“In the indigenous view, humans are viewed as somewhat lesser beings in the democracy of species... Plants were here first and have had***

***a long time to figure things out. They live both above and below ground and hold the earth in place. Plants know how to make food from light and water. Not only do they feed themselves, but they make enough to sustain the lives of all the rest of us. Plants are providers for the rest of the community and exemplify the virtue of generosity always offering food. What if Western scientists saw plants as their teachers rather than their subjects? What if they told stories with that lens?” (p.346)***

The story we might tell is one of reciprocity between people and planet and between past and future. We can learn from plants and the ways they provide, collaborate, and exchange.

Holistic agroecological food systems require a decolonial approach that is circular, decentralised, collective, collaborative, autonomous, and include ancestral wisdoms. In this way, we can achieve a vision for the future that encourages mycorrhizal growing networks in which our communities relocate, horizontalise, and thrive, in which the complex plurality inherent in our biodiverse ecosystems is defended, celebrated, and protected. And ultimately, in this way, we can transition to the Zapatista epistemological vision of “un mundo donde quepan muchos mundos” – a world where many worlds fit – worlds of thriving small-scale crops, reclaimed spaces, localised food systems, and co-operative communities. ■

*To hear more about the work of Nourish Scotland’s Fork to Farm Dialogues and the Glasgow Community Food Network, check out UN House Scotland’s Climate and Gender podcast series Connecting Women’s Voices on Climate Justice,<sup>9</sup> and have a listen to the second episode, From Scotland to Ecuador: Building Local Relationships for Healthy and Resilient Food Systems<sup>10</sup>.*

# FREE STATES: CONTESTED TERRITORIES, NEW IMAGINARIES

**Territorial struggle and prefigurative politics were evident at the Pollok Free State in the 1990s, opening up new possibilities beyond protest. To mark the occasion of COP26 taking place in Glasgow, Pablo Routledge, Gehan Macleod and David Lees write how a new Govan Declaration of Independence – a Govan Free State at GalGael – will create a space for gathering and pose critical questions about power and political imagination in a time of climate emergency. Photos by Oran Macleod.**

**T**HIS NOVEMBER, GLASGOW will be hosting the 26th United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) meeting – or Conference of Parties (COP 26). Previous COP meetings over the past 25 years have yielded few enforceable agreements, while greenhouse gas emissions have soared globally, precipitating climate breakdown.

The COP26 meeting in Glasgow comes at a critical time given the accentuation of the climate emergency across the world. In this year alone, we have witnessed the lethal and destructive power of wild fires across the Western United States, Siberia, Greece, Turkey, and Italy; floods in China, Australia, Germany, Belgium, and the Netherlands; record winter storms in Spain and the US; hurricane, cyclone, and large storm impacts in the US, Fiji, Indonesia, and the UK; and dust storms in China.

While government negotiators will meet in Glasgow sequestered from the general public, protestors from around the world will congregate in the city to demand climate justice. Climate justice foregrounds how participation and accountability can come into conversation with the need for sustainability and social justice. This recognises the interconnectedness of the issues underlying capitalism – namely, that ecological destruction and economic domination in the name of profits and growth, as well as racial, gender, and class oppressions, are the key drivers of

social and environmental injustice.

Such injustices have a long and complex history of having been resisted in different ways across the planet. One form of resistance against environmental injustice and exploitation has come in the form of ‘free states’ and ‘autonomous zones’ of various kinds. Indeed, the notion of free states as spaces of autonomy, communing, and engagement has a long and rich activist history.

In the early 1990s, Pollok Free State was created as a protest encampment in Glasgow as part of mobilisations against the construction of the M77 motorway in the city. These in turn formed part of a broader wave of anti-roads protests that emerged in the UK during the 1990s, challenging the Tory government’s road building programme.

Pollok Free State was an encampment of tree houses, tents, and benders (do-it-yourself dwellings) located in the Barrhead woods of Pollok Estate in the path of the projected motorway. Located south of Glasgow’s River Clyde, the Free State was sited amidst several low-income housing estates, including those of Pollok, Corkerhill, and Arden. Emerging in 1992 out of the actions of Colin Macleod, an Earth First! activist and Pollok resident, the camp acted as a visible symbol of resistance to the motorway. It stood as a critique of the environmental damage caused by road building and an example of how people might live their lives differently, issuing its own passports as symbols of autonomy

from the British state, more than four years before the Scottish parliament was inaugurated. Pollok Free State would go on to inspire many and for years to come, and morphed into the GalGael Trust<sup>1</sup> in Govan, a community organisation which Colin saw as a modern day people reclaiming the right to self-determination.

Free States and autonomous zones symbolically announce the act of claiming, bordering, and making space, as well as the contestation over land use.<sup>2</sup> The making of space in such zones involves various objectives and operations, including establishing media and communications infrastructures that provide mainstream media tents, liaisons, and activist media alongside everyday protest activities that constitute the free states as sites of social reproduction. These include legal, medical, and activist trauma support; governance infrastructures such as meeting spaces, announcement boards, decision-making policy guidelines etc.; and activities that reproduce everyday life in the camps such as dealing with food supply, cooking, shelter, sanitation, and the maintenance of communal and private space.<sup>3</sup>

In France, for example, *Zones a Defendre* (Zones of Defence, or ZADs) have emerged over the past decade at various locations across the country protesting destructive developments and calling for climate justice. One example is the ZAD at Notre-Dame-des-Landes (near Nantes) constructed >>



on nearly 5,000 acres of wetlands, farmland, and hamlets to protest the construction of an airport planned by the French government in partnership with Vinci's (the world's largest multinational construction firm). As an integral part of their resistance, this ZAD has practiced creative alternatives to resource extraction through cultivating crop rotations of wheat and buckwheat, and establishing a textile workshop, microbrewery, and bakery.<sup>4</sup> As a result of the solidarity forged between local farmers and climate justice activists in their resistance to attacks by armed police and other forms of state repression, the airport was shelved in 2018.

More recently, in 2020, in Seattle (US), hundreds of activists, who had been demonstrating against police brutality since the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis, converged on the Capital Hill neighbourhood of the city and set up a peaceful occupied protest. There, they distributed free food and medical supplies, planted community gardens, and held film screenings and workshops. The area was declared the Capitol Hill Autonomous Zone and later the Capitol Hill Occupied Protest (CHOP). During its brief duration, the CHOP was a police-free, self-governing utopia. A food co-op and

medics' corner were established and there were classes, lectures, speakers, poetry, live music, and huge works of art created.

For journalist and political theorist Raul Zibechi, the art of making space in community-based struggles potentially enables a dispersal of power from the state and capital.<sup>5</sup> The social relations generated comprise spaces "in which to build a new social organisation collectively, where new subjects take shape and materially and symbolically appropriate their space."<sup>6</sup> In Zibechi's view, territory is the crucial space in which contentious politics are fashioned, understood as both material territory (involving struggles over the access, control, use, and configuration of environmental resources such as land, soil, water, biodiversity, as well as the physical territory of communities, infrastructure, etc.) and immaterial territory (involving struggles over ideas, knowledges, beliefs, conceptions of the world, etc.).<sup>7</sup> For indigenous peoples, inclusive of the relationship to their land and communities, territorial struggles comprise resistance to the theft of land and other resources and the

*Previous page: Clyde view from Govan;  
Below: metalwork GalGael logo;  
Right: Meadowside shipyard.*

appropriation by capital and the state of indigenous sovereignty.<sup>8</sup>

Such 'territorial' struggles are conceptualised by Zibechi as "societies in movement", defined through their creation of social relations of autonomy characterised by the (re)appropriation of resources, increased potentials for co-operation and transversal connection, the generation of new types of knowledge and capacities that facilitate self-organisation, and more horizontalist (i.e. non-hierarchical) organisational forms.<sup>9</sup> Many of these characteristics have been termed forms of 'prefigurative politics' (i.e. living now the future that is desired). The spaces they make represent 'commons' – resources that are collectively owned or shared between people and the relational power generated by folk acting and being-in-common.<sup>10</sup>

Making and creating space is also about articulating the symbolic significance of particular spaces and the protests that take place within them. Practices of prefigurative politics, or 'societies in movement', symbolise the disruption of and a resistance to neoliberal capital accumulation and the attendant climate breakdown, articulating alternatives to the status quo.

In our age of climate emergency, all struggles for climate justice become prefigurative territorial struggles in one way or another. For example, struggles by farmers' movements in the majority world for food sovereignty (i.e. farmers' control over the means of environmentally sustainable and culturally appropriate food production) take claiming and/or defence of land as a starting point for struggle. Struggles for community-owned energy renewables require a territorial basis for the siting and production of that energy, such as with the *Energiewende* (energy transition) in Germany.<sup>11</sup>

Many of the characteristics outlined above – including territorial struggle and prefigurative politics – were evident at the Pollok Free State in the 1990s. The act of declaring a free state opened up new possibilities beyond protest: new imaginaries, new forms of discourse. It was undoubtedly a site of social reproduction – something that is still true of GalGael today. As COP convenes for a 26th occasion, and as GalGael prepare to celebrate our 25th year, we could not escape the irony in the convention landing a few blocks away from our workshop. With UN and UK

law poised to displace Scots law in the Blue and Green zones for the duration of COP, we thought it fitting to mark the occasion by declaring independence anew, with a Govan Free State.

Colin Macleod would come to describe Pollok Free State as a leading question, asking "Where is our democracy? Where is our parliament?"<sup>12</sup> Much has taken place in the past 25 years, but too little has changed. Govan Free State will pose similar critical questions about power and political imagination in the face of climate collapse – questions set alight by the winds of wildfires and a global pandemic. We want to divest of our faith in the instruments and institutions that seem unable to respond adequately, while acknowledging the many people with tender intentions caught up in these mechanics. We will look to constitute a 'convergence space'<sup>13</sup> of community members, activists, ideas, dialogue, and creativity, where folks will articulate together shared concerns and collective visions to generate a politics of solidarity founded on common ground.

A Govan Declaration of Independence, framed by a critical understanding of interdependence and radical dependence, will bring a wholly different aspect to the multitude of grassroots initiatives taking place in the city. Through it, we will playfully explore the notion of nations and states, alongside what it means to be a people of plural heritages. We want to explore practices to reclaim responsibility for the contested territories of our collective futures. The statement "declare yourself welcome" will define the borders of our territories. We'll print and issue our own passports and make our own ceremonial 'objects of state'. We'll also invite others to declare their own Free States and hope to launch a downloadable *Declare Yourself A Free State* pack, a template for a constellation of distributed Free States. This is an invitation to "decolonise yersel" – be that your bedroom, your tenement close, your street, your community garden, however you might choose to define your territory – in a declaration of hope, of intent, of solidarity to counter fatalism and fire radical imagination.

Here in Govan, in the midst of an existence wrought with intergenerational trauma and unprocessed pain, we will gather ourselves and our practices of collective grieving – needed



## Notes

- 1 GalGael Trust: [galgael.org](http://galgael.org)
- 2 Halvorsen, S. (2012) 'Beyond the Network? Occupy London and the Global Movement', *Social Movement Studies* 11(3-4), pp.427-433
- 3 Feigenbaum, A., Frenzel, F., McCurdy, P. (2013) *Protest Camps*. London: Zed Books
- 4 Collectif Mauvaise Troupe (2016) *Défendre la ZAD*. Paris: Éditions de l'Éclat
- 5 Zibechi, R. (2010) *Dispersing Power social movements as anti-state forces*. Edinburgh: AK Press; Zibechi, R. (2012) *Territories in Resistance A Cartography of Latin American Social Movements*. Edinburgh: AK Press
- 6 Zibechi, 2012, p.19
- 7 See also: Escobar, A. (2008) *Territories of Difference: Place, Movements, Life, Redes*. London: Duke University Press
- 8 Coulthard, G. S. (2014) *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press
- 9 Zibechi, 2012
- 10 Caffentzis, G. (2012) 'In the Desert of Cities: Notes on the Occupy Movement in the US', talk presented at "The Tragedy of the Market: From Crisis to Commons", a community gathering, Vancouver, B.C./Coast Salish Territory, 8 January 2012, accessed on 26/06/12 from: [reclamationsjournal.org/blog/?p=505](http://reclamationsjournal.org/blog/?p=505); see also Chatterton, P., Featherstone, D., & Routledge, P. (2013) 'Articulating Climate Justice in Copenhagen Antagonism the Commons and Solidarity', *Antipode* 45 (3), pp.602-620
- 11 Routledge, P., Cumbers, A., & Derickson, K. (2018) 'States of just transition: Realising climate justice through and against the state', *Geoforum* 88, pp.78-86
- 12 BBC Radio Scotland (2005) Interview with Colin Macleod [radio broadcast], *Life in Question*
- 13 Routledge, P. (2003) 'Convergence Space: process geographies of grassroots globalisation networks', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 28(3), pp.333-349; Routledge, P., & Cumbers, A. (2009) *Global Justice Networks: geographies of transnational solidarity*, Manchester: Manchester University Press
- 14 Hamish Henderson (1960) 'The Freedom Come-All-Ye'. Available at: [scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/poem/freedom-come-all-ye/](http://scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/poem/freedom-come-all-ye/)
- 15 Comité Invisible (2014) 'To our friends'. Translated by Hurley, R., 2015. Available at: [theanarchistlibrary.org/library/the-invisible-committe-to-our-friends](http://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/the-invisible-committe-to-our-friends)

now more than ever as climate catastrophes coalesce. In the face of so many false solutions and uncertainty, we hope to create experiences of quiet, depth, and meaning so as to process harsh realities and draw strength.

Our Govan Free State gatherings will also reclaim cultural inheritances and remember our own traditions, folklore, songs. Inspired by thinkers such as Hamish Henderson his 'Freedom Come-All-Ye'<sup>14</sup> and evoking the tradition of hospitality, the Free State will breathe life into discourse centred on our emancipation, independence, and international reconciliation through shared space, food, and music.

We note that COP26 starts near the time of All Hallows, All Saints, and the much older *Samhain* – a Gaelic liminal or threshold festival

marking the end of the four quarters of the Celtic year. It is a seasonal time of waning light and of passing over, a time for the death of old systems – and perhaps the birth of new worlds? We will also invoke older laws and traditional practices from the Althing (assembly fields) of Iceland or the Udal Law of Shetland and Orkney or, closer, from the ancient law mound of Doomster Hill here in Govan. We will make oaths to wild places, dying species, and more climate vulnerable communities and peoples. And we will explore with curiosity traditional forms

of gathering and place-making, such as the ancient practice of the *aonach*, or great assembly.

By reclaiming territories, material and immaterial, we seek to stand with other indigenous peoples globally and all those left vulnerable, marginalised, or brutalised by the growing extremities of wealth and weather or many other forms of violence. Our hope is that the Free State will extend a gesture 'beyond itself'<sup>15</sup> and even beyond Glasgow. Such spaces consist of a series of spatially distributed acts and processes: those physically present are always part of more spatially

extensive virtual and digital networks of support and organisation.

Political activities of alliance can open up the political order for challenge, through visible, embodied acts of resistance. Alliance building for climate justice must also invent ways of saying, seeing, and being, that nurture a politics of affinity, and that engender new forms of collective and inclusive enunciation, engendering new subjects for the uncertain futures that await us all. ■

*govanfreestate.scot*





# FREEDOM IS AN ATTITUDE: LAND, CRAFT, AND REBELLION IN THE HIGHLANDS

Luke Devlin interviews Craig Bryce on Scotland's rural housing crisis and the DIY ethic that's bypassing the market and bringing squatter skills to the Highlands. Illustrations by Owen McLaughlin.

**A**FFORDABLE ACCESS TO secure, decent housing was difficult enough for many before the pandemic. Afterwards, it's even worse. Buyers fleeing urban environments for an 'improved quality of life' have created a particularly overheated property market in the Highlands and Islands. Rural areas already suffering from depopulation and chronic housing shortages for locals, especially young people, are at risk of becoming even more stratified. An underground network of rebel DIY housebuilders and campaigners are fighting back, finding ways to move through the cracks of a broken system to build the foundations for housing and land for all. LESS spoke to one of them, musician and strawbale self-build advocate Craig Bryce (Brycey) about life and work on the offgrid home he shares with his family at Cannich, in a woodland clearing overlooking Glen Affric. Brycey also shares his poetical reflections on COP26. The interview has been edited for brevity and clarity.

Luke Devlin (LD): How did you get from being involved in the punk scene, underground DIY music and anarchism in Glasgow to deciding you wanted to live in the Highlands? What did you learn from DIY underground culture that helped you in that journey, and what lessons can you take from that kind of non-hierarchical organising in order to find these opportunities within this really dominating environment?

Brycey (B): We became exposed to the European squat scene and the idea that you can just set up whatever you need for yourself. It obviously needed you to have a physical space for that, and that just didn't seem possible in a flat in Glasgow. Sitting in Glasgow in our early-20s we were going, 'Right, in order to actually make that happen you have to live on the land and with the land.' So myself and Angus [Quinn, vocalist of Brycey's hardcore punk band, Sediton] moved to the Highlands way back then, and had a wee go at it. I ended up at the intentional community of Talamh. That was the thing that felt for me that we've got a physical space, we've got a foothold, and we've got collectivisation which allows us to have a way together bigger than our own individual resources.

I then realised that people with no assets,

if they collectivised could buy an 18th century farmhouse and 16 acres of land. We made that happen, and then we realised that we could also tap into different things by getting funding, by being in different organisations and learning in so many different ways. So we could identify a skills gap at Talamh and then try and find some way of getting someone trained to do it.

That just felt like an extension of the DIY underground squat thing where you would just take a building and you would just look after yourself. The one that really sticks out was The Wohlgroth in Switzerland; it had everything from a women's refuge to a clothes shop to a metal workshop, a wood workshop, a microbrewery. It had everything, right in the centre of Zürich, it was unbelievable. Completely blew me away that you could just get a bunch of people organising like that. So Talamh was a bit like a university for me in terms of giving me the idea that you can do that outwith the squat scene and within the landownership situation that happens within the UK. You can kind of circumvent it, through the power of collectivism.

I went down the career route of getting into doing outdoor education. Both my partner and I worked for a charity called Venture Trust out in Applecross, so we were living and working there, basically helping young offenders figure out how to get out of the court system and sort their lives out by taking them out on ten day expeditions and creating your own wee tribe, creating new value systems and helping people look at their lives differently. That helped us because we didn't need to have a house, because there was tied housing or a caravan that you could stay in, so we were able to just save all our money. That meant we could start looking for land somewhere.

We didn't want to end up with loads of debt or a mortgage, so that meant we needed to do it ourselves as much as possible and with the help of other people. So far, the whole build's been done, apart from digging out the foundations, by myself and [my partner] Ele or friends and family and volunteers. We did get a company called Straw Works to come in, pioneers in straw

bale housebuilding in the UK. They put the car tyre foundations in, the straw-bale walls, all the key skill bits like that, and ran those as courses with volunteers who wanted to learn that.

For the other bits, we've just watched Youtube videos! And asked for help from other people, and you really quickly tap into another community up here because it's normal for folk to build their own houses, it's not an unusual thing. You talk to the woman in the shop and she says, 'Aye, I've built two,' and it's not a big deal at all, it's dead normal. You meet someone and they'll say, 'Yeah, I grew up in a caravan until I was eight because my parents were building our house,' and all that. It's just a thing that happens here. And when at key points you need something, like you've got to do an Amish barn-raising or something, 15 people will turn up who have all built their own houses and understand what it feels like to be in that position and they'll come and help you do that. You might be from very different walks of life and have different ideas politically, but it's like, 'No, we know about that, we're going to come help you do that bit of your house.'

With our neighbours, we're co-operating on getting the water and services set up, and we've made the decision to stay off-grid. We'll probably end up with a micro-hydro and a mixture of wind and solar for the site.

We've lived off-grid basically for eight years here. So we were feeling smug when there was a power cut down in the village! We were at my dad's the other night and all the lights went out and my wee boy Oran's like, 'What's that?' 'It's a power cut, son.' 'What's a power cut?' He couldn't even understand the concept 'cause we're harvesting our own energy where we are.

LD: In terms of the build and the skills and resources that were needed, what was your starting point in terms of construction knowledge?

B: Yeah we knew absolutely fuck all about any of it man! Ele's quite a voracious reader, she'll research anything she wants to get into, so she did a whole design that was like a frame with straw bale infill. And then there was a course out in Elgin that the Straw ➤

Works people ran and [Ele] became really inspired. It's a load-bearing straw bale build, so the walls are actually held up by the bales, so there's quite minimal carpentry in it and it's quite basic. So it feels quite accessible and achievable.

There's been lots of bits of it so far where we've been like, 'What are we doing?!' But again, we've got a friend who's been a really good help to us and has done more traditional buildings before and was like, 'I'll come help you put your roof truss in,' and it's just been like, 'Oh yeah, that guy knows that, I've got a mate that knows this,' and then just researching it.

If you were a roofer you'd look at our roof and go, 'Aye that's a bit shonky,' and if you were a carpenter you'd look at our verandas and go, 'Urgh.' But we're not bothered about that because it's felt really empowering to do it ourselves, it's felt like quite a primal thing to create our own home. I think the only way we've been able to access stuff like that's maybe been through things like up at Carbeth to build a hut up there, and there's a community to help you. Whereas when you get into this kind of sustainable self-build, it just feels right – part of what we should be doing as a human being.

We're on year three of it, but that's because we're trying to do it without a mortgage, so we're not employing any tradespeople to come in because a) we can't afford to, and b) we don't really want to until we really need to. If it's got to be signed off, like electrics, then we'll have to do that, but we're trying to do everything ourselves, and for that to be part of the whole thing. Which means it takes a lot longer, and it's a bit frustrating.

But we've already helped other people, we've met other straw-bale folk that have started on that journey and we've been able to go and mentor them a wee bit and give them what they need – there's a kind of reciprocity to it.

LD: What more support should there be for people that are wanting to do that?

B: There are a lot of people just doing it! And obviously they don't want to publicise it. There are people all over the Highlands that are like, 'Right, I'm putting something in there and I'll wait to see if they find me.' And there are ways of doing it where you might be like, 'Right, my build is like a forester's hut where I stay when I'm working in the woods,' and then eventually it gets a change of use on it. All these things are underground and DIY, and I think the Thousand Huts campaign from Reforesting Scotland is feeding into that, there's a lot of skills going round that, even though the flipside of that is there's a lot of people with loads of money that are turning it into a strictly middle class or upper class pursuit almost.

Some folk do manage to blog it and use it as training opportunities and things like that. I don't have space to do that, I'm barely able to be involved in anything else other than building the house, looking after my

family, and doing the work I need to do.

It needs to be broken down for people to really repopulate and be here and live and work on the land in a way that's beneficial and supports a lot of folk and reverses the rural depopulation trend. The Airbnb thing's only made it worse. Young folk just cannae get a hoose. It's not new to the Highlands, but it's intensifying more and more. You add COVID into that and everyone leaving the cities to come to their 'rural idyll'; and the carbon credits, Brewdog creating a fucking forest to pretend they're carbon neutral. There's a lot of pressure that makes landownership even more tricky to get to.

LD: There is a challenging element to the commitment you've made that tests you to a certain extent, and forces you to maybe become more resilient and increase your capability in terms of exposure to taking care of your fundamental needs in a way that isn't about just buying a product or buying a service, because you have to do it yourself. What have been the main lessons you have learned about what really matters in life, and what are the most important things about human flourishing?

B: The things that on the surface other folk would be like, 'Woah, are you mad?,' like having to go and smash the pond with a sledgehammer to get water out of it because everything is frozen solid in the middle of the winter or whatever. We could have better systems in place that would mean we wouldn't have to do that, that's the thing, problem solving. You can't buy a product to do that because you're like, 'Right, so we need to get water from a pond all the way up the hill to come down to our caravan somehow.' So you've got to problem-solve everything that way. And that, again, feels really empowering. Then when you've got your roasting hot, pummelling 12 volt shower and you're like, 'Yes, we did it!' Now it's broken, so I'm not boasting that much! But all those systems that we had to figure out at first, it's just a total learning journey that makes you feel a sense of self-worth that wouldn't happen if you were just buying a product to solve those problems.

We're really lucky – the elements here, when it's windy, you know it's windy; when it's cold, you know it's cold. When we actually get the build finished and move in, we're moving ourselves slightly away from that to a different level of comfort that's going to feel really strange because we've lived like this for eight years now. And when it gets to the deep winter this year and it's -10°C again, and the whole site you can't drive a vehicle onto for maybe four months, and there's ice on the inside of the bedroom windows, there's points where you're like, 'Urgh.' But there's points where you do need to just dig a little deeper. And just that kind of slight life-threatening adversity brings something else out of you as a human being. And we do use technology. We watch films, we're chatting on Zoom now, we sit and play music, we do other things – it's not as if we're sitting here carving spoons all night with a

candle on. But it is different from living in a city with technology surrounding you as a thing that you just turn to all the time.

You just naturally spend more time in awe of nature. You've got to get your wood to bring down for the burner and you're looking at the view, or you see a red kite flying above you. You just feel a connection that you don't get unless you're living a bit closer to the land like this. And I think that moves also to having a spiritual connection, a feeling much more of belonging to where you are. I've bought a bit of land but I don't really believe in landownership, but I did it because I didn't want anyone to be able to take the housing that I have away from me and I wanted to be empowered by that. Also observing the Celtic calendar and all that – you're in that tradition, you're playing that music, you're hearing that language, you're hearing the wind and the rain and it's all part of what enriches your life. We feel really lucky. Especially when COVID happened, we couldn't be in a better place. We grow as much of our food as we can, we use an organic veg box, and I get most of the rest of my food from Highland Wholefoods. We rarely deal with supermarkets, we've removed ourselves a little bit from that.

Even the house; all the windows were bought second hand, as much as we can. We felled and milled all the wood on site here ourselves. Instead of going and buying the timber, you actually get your mates and chop the trees down and mill them yourself, and you just do that with everything. It's just part of how you try and operate. And it saves you a lot of money now as well, because the prices are insane. We've got our wood out there for the rest of the build, and if we had to buy that now, we'd not be able to.

I do feel more centred as a human being – with my family on the land, doing what I'm doing – than I ever have in my life. And there's lots of reasons for that, but I think it is that thing of thinking, 'Right, I'm putting my roots down here and this is a long term thing.' And it's not, 'Oh, then we can sell the house and move somewhere else and move up the ladder,' and all that. This is for Oran, when I'm away this is Oran's house, and hopefully his family's place if that's what he wants. Once we've moved on from the house being built, we'll try and get a self-sustaining ecosystem here which is also inclusive for people to come and enjoy. I wouldn't rule out us trying to get involved in helping people access this kind of thing in a more formal way once we have finished everything, because it's important to me to not just be like, 'We're sorted now,' and then sit back.

LD: What are your thoughts on sharing that learning about relationship and reciprocity that you mentioned with folk that are living in cities who either are not going to have the opportunity to do it or maybe don't want to? Many want to live in a city, or have to, but how people live in cities has to change drastically as well.

B: It's as simple as collective organisation –

something like GAS [Glasgow Autonomous Space] being there now, or even the Kinning Park Complex and the way that operates. There's lots of small scale things like that already happening, and they are all actually there, it's just that you don't hear about it. I think it will scale up, I don't think it's going to drop away suddenly. Going back to COP26 and the bigger picture of it, like Greta Thunberg is saying, the way capitalists are going to 'fix' climate change, capitalism and climate change are interlinked – the thing we keep coming up against is land and property ownership. I don't mean just demonstrations, but just linking up as communities and creating these autonomous spaces as well, and then networks will just keep growing. Because people are realising that the people in power are not doing it and are not going to do it. Mutual aid basically, anarchism. Who are the people stepping up and getting things done at the refugee camps? It's not the authorities. It's mutual aid. It's that spirit that underpins everything.

It needs more direct action activism, but what Talamh and the Pollok Free State really taught me is that you can't spend all your energy going against what you don't like as it leaves very little to create what you do like. I think that's tipped over a bit now and loads of people are building what they do like, and

seeing those networks, just small groups and collectives of people who are working together – that's the only way I can kind of see this knowledge spreading out without getting greenwashed or co-opted.

I do worry that it's too slow – because the power of what it's up against in terms of resurgent fascism and climate change, and the way that the powers that be seem to be able to just manipulate the media narrative. My only way of staying sane against that is to actually just link up with people and go and do what you want to happen.

And whether that's being at COP and having the demonstrations and all the rest of it, or creating a food garden in your local area and teaching people how to grow in an urban setting. And making sure places don't get gentrified and developed, there's green space, cycle routes, all these little victories. You can't expect these powers that be to change because they rely so heavily on the profit motive, they don't seem to understand that GDP shouldn't be all we focus on. It's starting to happen, but it needs to happen now.

Our society is fragile and vulnerable because we've been deskilled so much in that way, we just phone someone these days, you don't do it yourself. Things like tool libraries and being able to actually share that expertise is key. I'm not being totally prepper

about it, but industrial society is not going to be able to keep going the way it is, so you need a different set of skills to transition through that. And that includes the ability to be able to organise co-operatively and interact with each other that doesn't involve hierarchies and coercion. And that's such a valuable skill that we're really going to need.

As a movement to become something bigger and stronger, it has to involve the people in the schemes as well. I remember there was a group called the Milton Class War Casuals and they were mad techno heads, but they looked like a bunch of mad neds that just went out clubbing, but they were switched on politically. If you had all the schemes like that, the power that is sitting in those communities if they were plugged into all these things as well. Resistance to capitalism and what's happening with climate is pretty white and middle class and that's something that really needs to change. ■

## COP OUT 26

*We are witnessing  
death throes of dynastic dinosaurs  
Oil and coal junkies  
in a GDP suicide cult*

*Cognitive zombies  
stumbling along a pathway  
to planetary destruction  
They see the flames licking  
at the edge of their vision  
as they wade through  
floods of misinformation  
Eyes stinging at rank hypocrisy*

*On an extractive treadmill  
A vicious cycle  
of greed and short termism  
Fresh out of ideas  
Unwilling, unable  
to go cold turkey*

*And like any addict  
they mislead, lie, distract  
Pretend they will change  
Creating a literal smokescreen  
for their deadly habit*

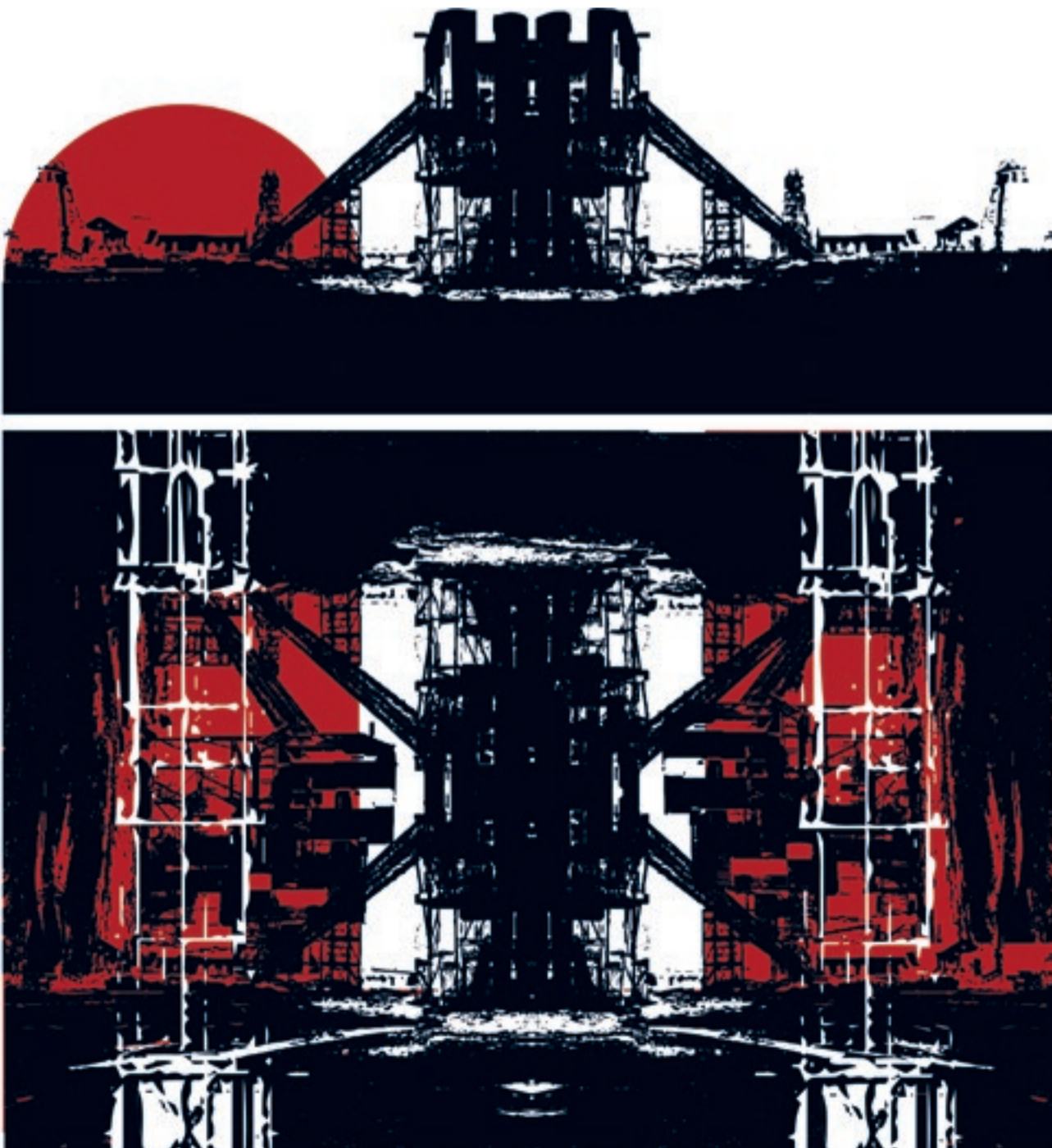
*Green new deal? = carbon copy*

*COP out 26  
White men in suits  
dancing a gruesome can can  
Kicking the can, firmly out of sight*

*The fact is the most planning  
they have done  
is on how to contain our fury*

*The question is  
Are they taking the rest of us down with them?  
The answer is  
Up to us.*

*By Brycey*





# LANDMARK: A CLIMATE BEACON FROM A COASTAL COMMUNITY

David Blair, a woodsman and climate activist, built a 20-metre-long and 6-metre-high ark as a monument to climate breakdown and the extinction crisis near Tighnabruaich, Argyll. Rhyddian Knight interviews David about the process of guerrilla building in a coastal community, and public art as a life raft in an unravelling climate. Photos by the authors.

FRESH RAINFALL SHIMMERS on the aspen below, there's a break in the weather and we sit on the promontory at Dunbeag on the Cowal peninsula looking across the valley to the Isle of Bute, with Insharnock in the distance. To our right is the peninsula of Ardlamont and the Isle of Arran. Beyond the huge glass doors, guinea fowl walk the decking, while nuthatches share the bird-feeder with a passing red squirrel. An ancient spaniel guards the threshold.

I'm sat with my neighbour David Blair at his home on the outskirts of Tighnabruaich. It is a glorious, celebratory day for an interview. "I've built the ark," he says, "and so far it's having the effect I hoped it would". Between us and our cups of tea on the kitchen table is a copy of this week's *Dunoon Observer* and *Argyllshire Standard*, dated Friday 1st October 2021.

In bold type on the front page is the headline 'Council Declares Climate Emergency'. The first paragraph begins, "Three weeks ago a symbolic ark appeared above Tighnabruaich with its builder David Blair saying 'Argyll & Bute Council has not declared a climate emergency'".

I ask David if it's been a long time coming... He tells me, "I felt I was being fobbed off and it didn't seem they were taking it seriously enough, and so the ark seems to have promoted that change pretty rapidly, three weeks from its completion – and that's it declared".

David is emphatic, alight in his conviction, "I think COP26 is the most important meeting of human beings ever on this planet. If this really is our last chance to save ourselves from ourselves and actually deal with this situation of climate change, the meeting is fundamental to this happening. We need action, not just the youth, we all do; we need to see it happening."

As I sit cradling tea and taking this all in, I begin to reflect on an *Guardian* article<sup>1</sup> that broke the news of the Kyles Ark. I'm curious about a reference David made there of appealing directly to people's hearts as a way of bypassing the numbness that comes with waves of apocalyptic messaging. I ask him about it.

David Blair (DB): The ark was a way of trying to go beyond all that talk and create something that people would recognise as a form, then connect that with the story of the

great flood; and then link that without any interpretation to sea level rises today, and the extinction crises which I feel is very relevant today.

When I've been up there, nearly everyone is aglow, it touches people emotionally, there's a connection to that form, a story which we've learned from picture-books since we've been very young. It reminds them of something from their childhood.

Rhyddian Knight (RK): Where did the seed or conception of the idea come from?

DB: I had the idea over 20 years ago; I've been here 26 years. I did think I'd build it up on the duinn; back then the majority would not have made the connection. I nearly built it last year, in the run up to COP26, but if I built it during the pandemic they wouldn't have got the right impression. Now was the right time to do it. We started milling the wood in February and March from larch that was being felled to waste from within three miles. It was important to use the larch. It was diseased with *Phytophthora ramorum*, imported by humans and exacerbated by climate change. Because of its susceptibility to the disease, larch is a species we are likely to lose in Scotland in the next few decades. If *Phytophthora ramorum* gets into the Sitka, that's the end of Scottish forestry.

I did a lot of surveying, as it had to be the right place in the landscape for it to make sense. If it was too far back, it wouldn't look like it was 'ready to launch'. When the time came, we put it up in two weeks. I wanted it to spring up so that it created the biggest impact. If it had gone through extensive planning approvals, I felt the impact would have been diluted by the process.

I've since engaged with the planning department and am applying for change of use for the field to allow the construction of environmental art.

The aspect is good. It's not in your face, or intrusive from the village; you have to look for it.

## RAISING AN ARK

AS FAR AS symbols go, this structure is huge in scale. Built with a small group of people over a fortnight on a local hill under the radar from the authorities, I feel a sense of mischievousness just talking about the project. I ask David what the process of building was like for him.

DB: It was a buzz, it was full on. We started on a Monday and had a couple of hours working out a plan for the base frame – keeping our heads low below the skyline. We built five lower frames, then put them all up and joined them together on the Wednesday. It was one day, and already there was a big structure on the hill.

We were a great team; it was my brother Rob and my friend Scott Smith.

RK: I've been calling you guys 'Guerrilla builders', did you encounter any flack while it was going up or were you shielded from that?

DB: As soon as the five frames went up, it was very visible on the skyline and there was no hiding. We just had to get on with it. The next day, I got an email from the planning authority saying, "There's a structure on the hill, can you direct me to who the landowner might be?" I wasn't asked who was building it, so I gave them the postal address of the landowner, who is entirely supportive – in the lease for the field that I took out it mentions the building of an ark in the plans. I gave the postal address so that planning had to get in touch with him in writing. We'd finished building it before the planning authority came back to me, which is what I wanted.

RK: I'd always assumed you didn't need planning permission to build a boat...

DB: They weren't particularly pleased I'd done that. They actually blocked the secondary school from visiting. They wanted to come out on an educational trip, interview me and learn about climate change and COP 26. The council wouldn't let them have transport to come out because I didn't have >>



planning for it; which I thought was really shocking. They seem more interested in red tape than the future.

RK: That can be tiring... right?

DB: It was good to get it out of my head. I didn't have any proper drawings, so the whole ark was occupying a space in my head. That design process continued all the way through the build, making sure it was right, strong; robust. It was a full on process. We built an average of four or five hours a day. I estimated the build was roughly 180 human hours. It was a push, but it was exactly what I hoped it would be. Since it was built, I've been riding the wave of interest, and publicity and inquiry.

I just need to see governments taking things seriously now. The crisis has got to a point where it's beyond individual public actions. We need them to unite behind this single issue, above all other issues, finding a way forward that stabilises global temperatures below warming of 1.5°C. We're already up to 1.2°C and we are seeing the wildfires, and

the storms and the floods around the world has been shocking.

It's an exponential thing; I likened it to watching a pot of water coming to the boil. You see the initial swirls as it's heating, the more it heats the more crazy it gets; it speeds up and up with every degree. It's a similar thing with our climate. It's absolutely critical to save ourselves from ourselves and tackle the climate and ecological emergency.

RK: It's like the bedrock of culture, isn't it?

DB: Unless we can stabilise the climate, then all other aspirations of humanity become nothing in the face of an overheated planet.

### CREATIVE PROCESS AS A LIFE RAFT

I BECAME INTENSELY curious, suddenly inquisitive in my focus, I want to know what keeps those among us who are acutely aware of teetering on the edge of oblivion healthy? What impulse or attribute is it that allows us to respond in a relational way? I want to know if there are any principles here that can help and nurture cultural creatives and leaders in communities to respond in the midst of catastrophe. I adjust my inner compass, reach for some hazelnuts on the table to crack open, and head off in that direction.

RK: Has this realisation been with you a long time?

DB: I've been aware of the climate and ecological emergency for over 30 years now. It's what brought me here. I came to escape, because humanity seemed desperate to head over a cliff. I was saddened to hear recently that 66% of 16-25 year olds feel that humanity is doomed. Thirty years ago we were maybe 1%, but now it's more than half of the youth think we don't have a chance and I think that's desperately sad.

They need to see governments acting with boldness and conviction, that's the only way we're going to solve the crisis of anxiety from the youth. This is the big one.

RK: You need to see adults being congruent between their actions and their words?

DB: I must admit, I'm just not seeing it.

RK: If we are considering a large proportion of our youth have woken up to the climate emergency, and you've lived with that realisation for 30 years, you could call it a burden, right?

DB: It is a burden, it's not a comfortable thing to live with, it's like something always in the back of the mind.

RK: So what are the things that have kept you going in the midst of that burden then?

DB: I guess trying to do something about it. I'm restoring and living in a bit of semi-natural and ancient oak woodland. I've learned to build with it. I've started the Kilfinan Community Forest to try and give other people the chance to build themselves. I've installed hydro schemes and tried to involve myself with trying to do what ever I can in this village to make life more sustainable.

A lot of people thought I was aiming for self sufficiency, and we do grow a lot of our own food, we keep poultry, my wife goes fishing and butchers local venison from the hill.

We try to eat as local as possible from the area. None of that makes any difference if the worlds' leaders don't do the big stuff. But that's how I dealt with it, by totally focusing and putting all my energy into trying to live more sustainably and encourage that opportunity in the district.

RK: When you do that, what do you get?

DB: It's been a great journey! Right now, we are sitting in our home we built 3 years ago. It's wood, it's got a Passivhaus Standard; by far the most high-spec house I've built – others have been quite rustic, in the winter we used to have to have the wood stove on 24/7.

The journey has brought me to a really good place. By focusing on this underlying issue, it's directed my life towards trying to do things locally and sustainably... and it's great! I really think in a low-carbon future the world will be a better place for people. Everyone's feared – we are not going to be able to do anything and it's going to restrict our personal freedoms – but actually I just think people will be more connected to each other, more connected to their local area, more engaged with what's happening around them. We need to restore our landscapes... and that could be a beautiful and empowering and heartening thing.

I think humans ultimately need to have connection with other humans; we don't exist well in isolation. The last couple of years with the pandemic have been really hard on people. We've learned what it means to exist in isolation, which hasn't happened in recent history. I think we thrive on human contact but also on connection with our human habitat. Connection with our soils, you know, connection with where our food comes from; connection with everything that's around us.

*“I nearly built it last year, in the run up to COP26, but if I built it during the pandemic they wouldn't have got the right impression. Now was the right time to do it.”*

RK: I'm hearing what you're saying, but I'm also really with this youth statistic you were speaking of...

DB: The future is theirs, it's really up to the elders to give them a chance to have a future. I feel so much for the youth of today, I guess because I've been feeling like they do for so much of my life. For the majority of the youth worldwide to feel humanity is doomed is a really poor start, and I hope they feel that anger and channel it into action, whether that's through lobbying politicians or through creating a new life that's looking toward a sustainable future.

## COMMONS AS ARK, ARK AS COMMONS

IT'S AT THIS point that I realise these pronouncements, though inspired, are underscored with a great deal of humility, self-understatement and huge effort. David first came to Dunbeag and lived in a tent in the forest, then a hand hewn workshop, and the succession of nested buildings around me tell a story of habituating sustainably over decades.

Today, drinking tea amidst abundant terraces of fruit and nut crops, hectares of sensitively regenerated woodland, hydroelectric-pipes hand dug through miles of mountainside, in a *passivhaus* designed, milled, built green and dried in situ, there is an attention to detail evident in the craftsmanship that is borne of mindful observation of and in nature. It is directly apparent what energy channelled into creative process can really look like.

To the west, the 561 hectares comprising Kilfinan Community Forest, now fourteen years

young, has its own hydro scheme and harbours a number of sustainable micro businesses. Now the parish boasts self-builders raising timbers on affordable housing plots, woodland crofters restoring land once lost in the maw of commercial forestry. It is an enlivening place containing allotments, orchards, and an extensive path network. The charity has even initiated devolved systems of decision making.

Interestingly, all of these regenerative processes, ark included, are visible in the landscape at different vantage points from David's home at Dunbeag. Reaching out to world leaders with an actual ark in a neighbouring field feels like a very reasonable and embedded gesture to perpetuate the self-determinative arc David has set forth for his local community.

RK: What would you say about the ark as a meeting place for folk?

DB: I'm overjoyed when I see people up there; that's what it's for. I created it to be a physical meeting space. There is a bench seat that runs right round the base of the ark, you could fit 60 or 70 people in there. It could be a space for outdoor conference almost. Last week, the primary school were up, all 50 kids were all within the ark getting a chat from the local minister. I do hope that it finds itself as a space where people can meet, to contemplate, to talk, to share; to discuss.

RK: We are just one coastal community amongst many. If someone was reading this with their own idea they've been sitting on, would we have a message for them?

DB: Go for it. The more we can raise the bar, the more we can up the ante with this, whatever

way that's possible. Creativity is certainly a way, the arts; someone recently suggested we have a coalition of artists for the planet... to be building stuff, painting stuff, whatever form of art they practice. Just make it about Now, make it about the planet and this critical point in time that we occupy right now.

A light rain falls, a blue-tit visits the feeder.

The spaniel's nose is on the window pane looking in. I open the door for him and ask David if there has been anything left unsaid.

DB: I had a retired human rights activist that's really keen to see it promoted in Glasgow for COP26, have it projected on and in buildings to try and encourage delegates to think big. The hope is some of the delegates will decide to take a break from the conference and come out to Tighnabruaich and see a little bit of what Scotland's all about and see how beautiful our coastlines are.

The finished construction is every bit as beautiful as it was in my head. I had in my mind it would be like living in the skeleton of a giant whale or something, a huge rib cage; it does feel like that it's a beautiful structure.

I enquire as to the future of the Kyles Ark, David Blair is buoyant: "It's over to what everyone's imaginations can think of." ■

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### Notes

- 1 Libby Brooks (2021) 'Ark on Scottish hillside attracts rising tide of interest', *The Guardian*, 20 September. Available at: [theguardian.com/environment/2021/sep/20/ark-on-scottish-hillside-attracts-rising-tide-of-interest](https://theguardian.com/environment/2021/sep/20/ark-on-scottish-hillside-attracts-rising-tide-of-interest)





# FIGHTING FOR ALL OUR TOMORROWS: A VIEW FROM KENYA

**Peter Kitelo Chongeywo is a leader of the Ogiek Indigenous Forest Peoples of Mount Elgon, Kenya. The Elgon Ogiek are struggling to stop being evicted from their ancestral community lands by government and international 'conservation' agencies. Illustration by Stewart Bremner.**

**F**OR ME WHEN you look at the realities of climate change it's been majorly driven by industrialisation. Industrialisation is hyped to countries in Africa as a good thing. No one is telling them that this model has failed. If that message comes from countries like the UK then people and governments here will see that they don't want to repeat the mistakes that have happened elsewhere.

Here in Kenya we have a huge opportunity for geothermal but we are also pursuing coal production. The Kenyan Government says they want to deal with climate change, but they also want to pursue cheap power because they see that as the model from countries that have industrialised. The people most badly affected by climate change are those in poor countries like Kenya. It is already affecting us with cyclones like the one in Mozambique the other day. It hits us hardest.

We need people in the UK to deal with climate change for themselves. When they do that they are doing it for the whole world. They can be an example for other countries and raise awareness that there is another path.

The Government in Kenya is going towards industrialisation, following the same model. We shouldn't be making the same problem that you have been making.

What has made people to block the roads in London? The fact that nobody is listening. Nobody caring. The majority of people feel that climate change is a price to pay for getting a living. And majorly people don't want to think further.

Can we get our livelihoods without harming the world?

Blockades or whatever bring that discussion

out. It's in good faith. While most don't want to take that step, these blockades bring the issue out that we need to address.

The economic growth model lies to people that it is dealing with climate change. In Kenya people are told to plant trees as if that was dealing with the cause of climate change, when it isn't. The biggest cause is fossil fuels. In Kenya it's not politically correct to speak about fossil fuels. Kenya is developing its oil industry. We are not saying the truth. We say we are dealing with climate change, at the same time we are developing our oil industry. You have to make a choice, otherwise you are not taking it seriously.

For us [the Ogiek forest people of Mt Elgon] climate change has been the excuse for dispossession. The community has not in any way contributed to the destruction of the forests or to climate change, but our communities are being sacrificed for proposed solutions that are not solutions. Climate change is being used as an excuse for the dispossession of forest communities who have protected their lands since time immemorial.

The Government are getting two for one. They are using the excuse of climate change to justify dispossessing communities, pretending that by dispossessing us they are protecting the forests. Secondly, this means they can pretend they are doing something about climate change while pursuing oil.

The same forces benefit from both. They profit from taking control of communities' forests, and profit from cheap coal, and they do nothing to change the model that is driving climate destruction.

Those who know the consequences of climate destruction feel it very personally, even though

the consequences are for everyone. When our land is being taken from us and destroyed we feel it very personally, even if in protecting our lands we are protecting it not only for ourselves but for everybody.

You are fighting for something that matters hugely to you personally, but you are doing it both for yourself and others. You know that if you don't act you will bear the consequences. You know that we will all bear the consequences. You don't have a choice. What you guys are doing is fighting for us all for our tomorrow.

People here can have no clue that the climate destruction here is being caused by what is happening on the other side of the world. We need to become aware of the link between floods and droughts here and the causes of climate change there. We have a huge problem of poverty. People are told that if we exploit oil it will end poverty, but it doesn't. The money is captured by a few, and meanwhile the climate is destroyed and ordinary people suffer.

As people here become aware we can link our struggle with yours. ■

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## **Context:**

*On the Mt Elgon Ogiek of Kenya: [forestpeoples.org/en/topics/customary-sustainable-use/news/2013/11/chepkitale-ogiek-community-document-their-customary-by](http://forestpeoples.org/en/topics/customary-sustainable-use/news/2013/11/chepkitale-ogiek-community-document-their-customary-by)*

*On conservation being used to dispossess communities from lands they have sustained for time immemorial (and therefore why the 'Half Earth For Nature' campaign is so dangerous): [forestpeoples.org/en/environmental-governance-rights-based-conservation/news-article/2017/recognising-real-conflict](http://forestpeoples.org/en/environmental-governance-rights-based-conservation/news-article/2017/recognising-real-conflict)*

# WASTED OPPORTUNITY: DECOUPLING SOCIAL MOBILITY FROM RESOURCE CONSUMPTION

**D**URING THE GLOBAL pandemic, Naomi Klein asked the newly furloughed classes, those of us who could afford the luxury of isolation, the ones framed in opposition to “key workers”: “What are we if not essential? Are we being kept like pets? For who?”<sup>1</sup>

At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, 30% of the UK’s workforce was furloughed.<sup>2</sup> For many of the people who make up Scotland’s “professional classes”, COVID-19 presented an existential, ideological crisis. As we stayed in our jammies, kneading dough and learning Tiktok dances, there was a realisation of our redundancy. When modern identity is realised through optimisation and productivity, this new reality hurt some egos. Thousands clambered towards a sense of usefulness, with record numbers signing up to support in their communities through Volunteer Scotland and British Red Cross.<sup>3</sup> The term “self-isolation” became locked into our daily lexicon, as we barricaded ourselves inside for 23 hours per day. A hurried exchange with a faceless delivery driver or an hour of daily exercise was the only moment of physical external engagement.

We experienced a novel psychological phenomenon, a new “us” and “them”: the key worker and the captive other. There were the real workers, the ones who literally and metaphorically lifted our nation through crisis – supermarket workers, carers, waste collectors, delivery drivers, teachers, healthcare workers. Many “professionals” did not make the cut. In 2013, David Graeber gave a veneer of academic rigour to Tom Leonard’s image of the ‘liaison coordinator’<sup>4</sup>:

**Kate Chambers on the class divisions and social inequality exposed by the pandemic and the environmental imperative to decouple social mobility from growth and resource consumption. Illustrations by Pearse O’Halloran.**

*“Huge swathes of people, in Europe and North America in particular, spend their entire working lives performing tasks they secretly believe do not really need to be performed. The moral and spiritual damage that comes from this situation is profound. It is a scar across our collective soul.”<sup>5</sup>*

We are in the era of the ‘Bullshit Job’, where cultural aspiration for social mobility and a political drive for closing the attainment gap has encouraged us to present as ambitious and upwardly mobile, regardless of whether the job we aspire towards is useful or not. This often includes the incentive to leave the community that nurtured

*“Playing the underdog is part of our nationbuilding, so the reality of Scotland’s historical role in the UK’s imperial enterprise, and the more recent propagation of the neoliberal agenda around the world, is often avoided”*

and sustained us, physically and imaginatively. I grew up under this narrative. It’s an ideology that encourages us to talk about our hometowns as ‘dead ends’, to valorise those who “got out”.

The UK Governments Social Mobility Commission defines ‘social mobility’ as ‘the link between a person’s occupation or income and the occupation or income of their parents. Where there is a strong link, there is a lower level of social mobility. Where there is a weak link, there is a higher level of social mobility.’

By definition, the weaker your link to your working-class roots, the more “successful” you are. In Scotland’s collective consciousness, there has always been an aspiration for getting up and getting out. According to T.M. Devine, an estimated 2.3 million people left Scotland for overseas opportunities between 1825 and 1938<sup>6</sup>: ‘Scotland’s biggest export in the nineteenth and twentieth century has been people.’<sup>7</sup> This trend of outward migration – or “export” – continued into the twenty-first century, with population loss of approximately 825,000 between 1952 and 2006.<sup>8</sup> Recognising how our push for social mobility has been a key part of Scotland’s colonial narrative makes us feel uncomfortable. Playing the underdog is part of our nation-building, so the reality of Scotland’s historical role in the UK’s imperial enterprise, and the more recent propagation of the neoliberal agenda around the world, is often avoided. This country

is the birthplace of the industrial revolution and the destructive, linear economic ideology that baked in the whole system of overconsumption, waste, and exploitation.

The pandemic picked scabs that many had tried to ignore. For those of us who took the ‘social mobility’ pill, and aspired to get up and get on, the revelation that we are not contributing much to society is hard to swallow. Social mobility is typically linked to moving away from traditionally operational and menial occupations into physically sedentary, strategic roles. When our jobs are more paper pushing than purposeful, the only signifiers of wealth, success, and “usefulness” left available to us are presented through consumption of goods and services. We saw this ideology from the UK Government during the pandemic, with “Eat Out To Help Out”<sup>9</sup> and easing of restrictions for high-street chain stores – a rally cry for us to consume our way out of economic crisis. In the peak of the pandemic, as the furloughed classes clicked and scrolled, filling our digital baskets to save the economy, the UK’s Prime Minister Boris Johnson stated that “there really is such a thing as society”.<sup>10</sup> Famously, Margaret Thatcher stated:

*“... and who is society? There is no such thing! There are individual men and women and there are families and no government can do anything except through people and people look to themselves first.”<sup>11</sup>* >>





It seemed that in the face of a global pandemic, society was the only thing that was real, and we all played our part within it. But what is often overlooked from this infamous interview with Douglas Keay of *Woman's Own* magazine is Thatcher's ambition for the façade of success expressed through material consumption. When asked what she was personally looking forward to achieving, she replied:

*“spreading the outward and visible signs of success ever more widely... You have to inspire their own efforts and then not take so much away from them that they have not the chance to go on improving themselves and increasing their personal property to their own and family's advantage.”*

Boris Johnson may have signed on to society, but when it comes to how that society functions, we are living Thatcher's blueprint. We work to consume and accumulate signifiers of wealth, i.e., more stuff. The pandemic did not disturb that core truth. In fact, it reinstated consumption as a key pillar of the good society. And as much as having wealth and nice stuff is a real and worthy pursuit for many, the reality of “accumulation as success” has found us consuming approximately 18.4 tonnes of resources per person per annum in Scotland.<sup>12</sup> We are surrounded by cheap stuff, designed to become obsolete, destined for a long, lonely life in landfill. All the while, as our homes become more cluttered, there's a growing vacuous space inside ourselves and our communities. Average ratings of life satisfaction and happiness are all declining in the UK, with ratings of happiness in Scotland falling by 1.2% as of March 2020.<sup>13</sup> The distinction between “key workers” and the rest of us only exacerbated this tension:

*“Real, productive workers are relentlessly squeezed and exploited. The remainder are divided between a terrorised stratum of the, universally reviled, unemployed and a larger stratum who are basically paid to do nothing, in positions designed to make them identify with the perspectives and sensibilities of the ruling class (managers, administrators, etc) – and particularly its financial avatars – but, at the same time, foster a simmering resentment against anyone whose work has clear and undeniable social value.”<sup>14</sup>*

*“Boris Johnson may have signed on to society, but when it comes to how that society functions, we are living Thatcher's blueprint. We work to consume and accumulate signifiers of wealth, i.e., more stuff. The pandemic did not disturb that core truth.”*

The furloughed classes faced the reality of their own redundancy in the social hierarchy, whilst looking out the window at the hardship faced by key workers, many of whom were also experiencing low pay, job insecurity and poor working conditions. It was clear that the lives of key workers were simultaneously essential and disposable: healthcare workers without adequate PPE, teaching staff in front of classes but not prioritised for vaccinations, those holding up our supply chains expected to work longer hours in dangerous conditions... As a result of the COVID-19 outbreak, 79% of the UK public now believe there is a large gap between different social classes and over half the public think the pandemic has increased social inequality.<sup>15</sup>

We can see it for what it is: an exploitative, empty system that pushes stuff around. A system that truly benefits no one (even the rich!) and pillages our natural world in the process. The social mobility dream makes sense. We want people to have opportunity, jobs, and adequate income, but this cannot not be at the expense of our planetary boundaries. Without any meaningful reduction on resource consumption, all our social mobility ambitions are just working towards equal opportunities for anyone, from any background, to have the chance to exploit other people and the planet and harm their own wellbeing in the process.

There is an environmental imperative to decouple social

mobility from growth and resource consumption. If Scotland is serious about reducing resource consumption, then we must wrestle with our materialistic culture, which is directly linked to aspiration and social mobility. People with more money consume more stuff: ‘around half the emissions of the richest 10% (24.5% of global emissions) are associated with the consumption of citizens of North America and the EU’ and ‘in the past 20-30 years, more carbon has been emitted by the ‘consumption [habits] of the already affluent, rather than lifting people out of poverty’.<sup>16</sup>

At present, we enjoy the benefits of our colonial past, continuing to push the environmental, social, and economic burden of our mass consumption on to the countries we import our products from. Our reliance on overseas economies for our stuff allows us to also export the carbon emissions associated with their production. Around 46% of the UK's carbon footprint is emissions released overseas to satisfy UK-based consumption, and this figure is not accounted for in national reporting of our emissions.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, when the electronics, clothing and plastic toys are broken or out of fashion, we send much of the waste back overseas for someone else to deal with.<sup>18</sup>

Right now, we are trying to put ourselves and our communities back together after a global pandemic. But during this process, and as the COP26 environmental conference comes to Glasgow in November 2021, there is much reflection on what ‘Building Back Better’ looks like for Scotland. For Zero Waste Scotland's ‘Decoupling Advisory Group’, which brought together a range of independent thinkers from across Scotland and beyond, solutions must focus on ‘reducing Scotland's consumption of goods and materials absolutely, rapidly, permanently and fairly’<sup>19</sup> and decoupling economic growth from resource use. We need to see a logic of ‘care and repair’<sup>20</sup> built into government policy, into our businesses and communities. We need wellbeing and meaningful work to be at the centre of our economic system, if we have any chance of saving ourselves from drudgery, mental health problems and growing inequality.

All our lives we have been told that we modern consumers are magpies, always scraping and searching for the next shiny thing. But it turns out that the

link between consumerism and wellbeing is about as real as the ‘thieving magpie’ myth: it turns out magpies do not steal shiny things, but in fact have ‘neophobia – fear of new things’.<sup>21</sup> We are not magpies, and we do not need to be defined by tired myths of aspiration as the accumulation of stuff. If the pandemic has taught us anything, it's that we long for meaningful connection, that we want to cultivate our communities and nurture skills to play a part in society. We have a chance to reframe social mobility away from consumption, creating aspiration to lead a meaningful life, with security, happiness, and freedom at its heart. It all starts with stepping away from stuff. ■

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# EDUCATION FOR TRANSFORMATION: RETHINKING EDUCATION IN A TIME OF ECOLOGICAL AND SOCIAL CRISIS

**T**HERE IS A great quote by Bill Shankly (the famous Scottish manager of Liverpool FC) who said, “Football isn’t a matter of life or death. It’s more important than that.” I feel much the same about education.

The Scottish Government is currently undertaking a consultation on Education Reform until 26th November 2021.<sup>1</sup> The stimulus for this is another report from the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) titled ‘Scotland’s Curriculum For Excellence – Into the Future’.<sup>2</sup> Other than appreciating the report’s authors’ bone dry sense of humour, there is nothing ‘Into the Future’ about the report at all. A more appropriate title might have been ‘Scotland’s Curriculum for Excellence – More of the Past’. If you were motivated to let your eyes wander through some of the 141 pages of the report, you could be forgiven for forgetting – as the authors seem to have done – that a climate emergency even exists.

This OECD Report follows their 2015 policy review ‘Improving Schools in Scotland an OECD Perspective’<sup>3</sup> which has had a major impact on Scottish education policy. The First Minister pledged their political integrity on achieving the closing of the attainment gap between the best and least well performing pupils in Scotland’s comprehensive schools. Since 2015, around £120 million of public funding has been duly allocated via mechanisms such as the Pupil Equity Fund and the Attainment Scotland Fund. There may be some readers who find this policy approach somewhat problematic; I would agree. Without having to

**It is only by mainlining the adoption of degrowth education that Scotland can begin to move to systems of educational practice that begin to address the multiple emergencies we face, writes Mark Langdon, member of the newly established Anti-Capitalist Education Network. Illustration by Andy Arthur.**

go into enormous detail, let us just start with a few salient facts (not alternative facts I hasten to add – you remember what facts are, I presume, articles of information which relate to truth).

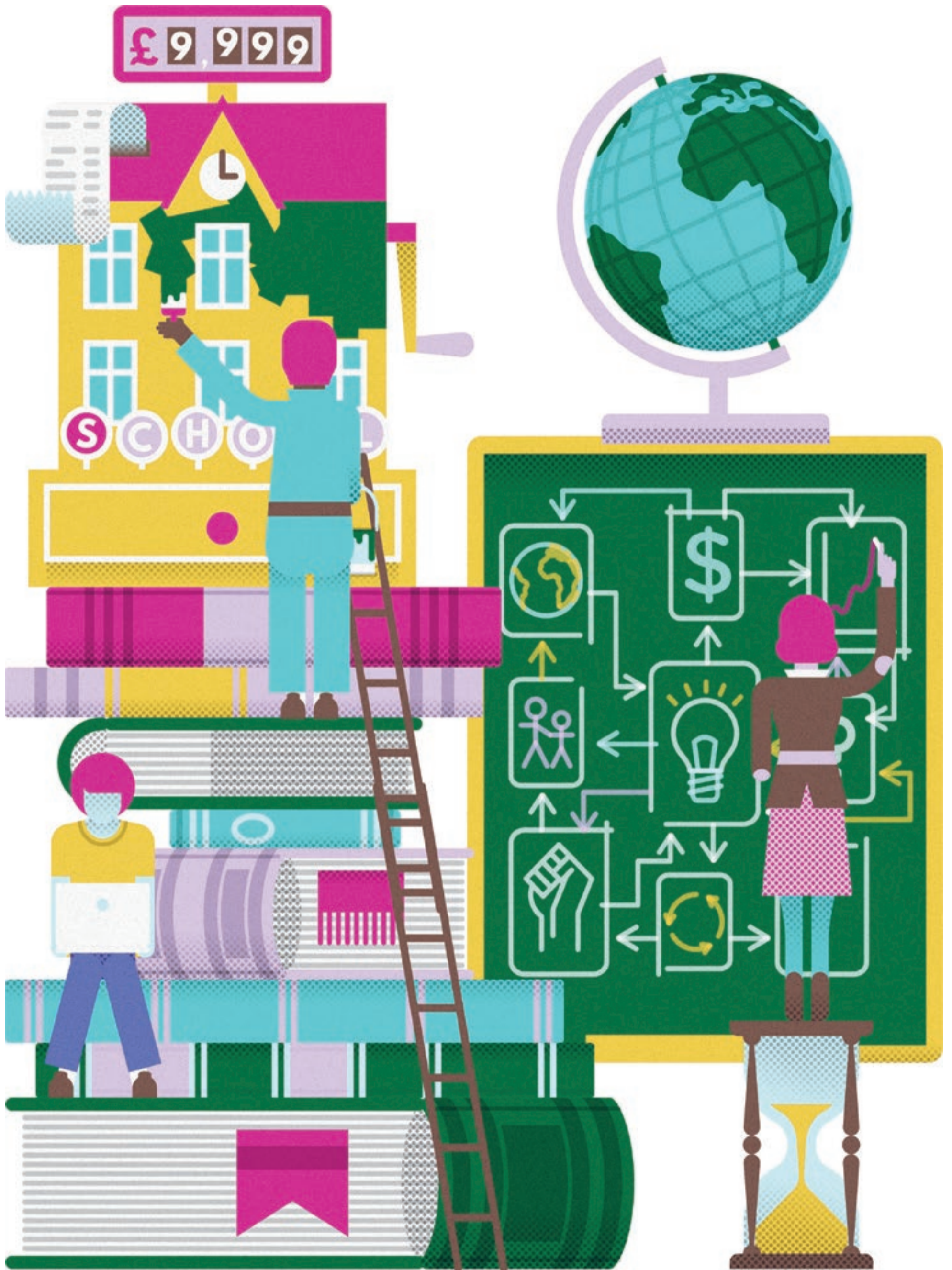
Firstly, children in Scotland, if they attend school regularly, only spend roughly 15% of their lives in school. Secondly, as James McEnaney helpfully points out in his new book *Class Rules: The Truth about Scottish Schools*, quoting Professor Dylan Wiliam of University College London’s Institute of Education, “only 7% of the variation between schools on this standard benchmark is due to the effect of the

school. The other 93% is due to factors over which the school has no control.” It seems there is a distinct possibility that children learn things when they are not at school! If only we had data to prove it! Thirdly, and I will stop here because this list could go on for some time, neither the OECD reports nor the Scottish Government scrutiny of the Curriculum for Excellence apply to – wait for it – Private Schools. Is this because private schooling has no impact on educational inequality in Scotland? This seems unlikely. McEnaney captures the impact of private schooling quite eloquently in these lines:

*“These elitist organisations are undeniable engines of social inequality – that is after all, the whole point of their existence. They sell social segregation rather than superior education, charging thousands and thousands of pounds per year for their product. Private schools allow the wealthy to purchase even greater privileges, and even deeper connections, for their kids and further distort our society in the process. It’s simple: public education exists to mitigate inequality whilst private education exists to protect it.”<sup>4</sup>*

Yet, I would argue, there are much bigger issues at stake in the political and culture wars that surround state education policy than performance tables and standardised testing. The fact that so much time, effort, and financial resources are still being poured into research and policy that takes little to no account of our ongoing crises of climate, biodiversity, >>

*“The fact that so much time, effort, and financial resources are still being poured into research and policy that takes little to no account of our ongoing crises of climate, biodiversity, inequality, and perpetual war should be of deep concern”*





inequality, and perpetual war should be of deep concern, not only to those who would see themselves as educators, but to all those desiring a better and liveable future for human and more-than-human life on earth.

Given education's key role in social reproduction, the fact that education policy in Scotland is still left to the 'experts' at the OECD is a travesty. It is long past time that education – lifelong rather than 3-18, the age groups covered by the CfE – becomes a more central 'ground of contestation' regarding anti-capitalism, decolonisation, gender equality, and ecological justice. A group of young activists called Teach the Future<sup>5</sup> are demanding fundamental change to educational practice around environmental issues. They also recognise that issues of climate change cannot be extracted from issues of climate justice, racial equality, and the broader vision of human and environmental rights. While the Scottish Government and Scottish Education make great emphasis on the value of 'pupil voice', whether young people are ultimately listened to still largely relies on whether or not their views threaten the current status quo.

There are many groups seeking to change approaches to education in Scotland. UPSTART is one such group that wishes to see Scotland bring in a Kindergarten stage before primary, with 'school' start age raised to seven years old. Their website offers an interesting perspective on why formal schooling in the UK starts at between four and five years of age:

*"We're trapped by history and tradition. In 1870, the English parliament chose an early school starting age so children's mothers could provide cheap labour in factories. Scotland followed suit, and ever since we've taken it for granted that formal education must start at five. (Only 12% of countries worldwide start children at school so early – and all bar one are ex-members of the British Empire.)"*<sup>6</sup>

But don't get your hopes up: despite a significant research base to support such a move, raising the age of formal schooling and bringing in a Kindergarten system is not on the agenda. The focus seems to remain on rearranging the deck chairs rather than setting a new course.

I would argue that the entire data gathering, and analytical processes employed by the OECD are highly dubious and lead to policy and practice being driven by data analysis and research that is unconsciously and in some cases consciously biased. Why do we feel that it makes sense or is desirable to measure the 'performance' of pupils in Scotland's schools as against those in China, Russia, or Qatar for example? However, if we wish to put store in the learning power of 'PISA' (the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment) then it tells us some fairly worrying tales, such as:

*"Students in Scotland report slightly lower life satisfaction than the OECD average and more prevalent fear of failure than average.*

*Competition between students seems to be slightly more common in Scotland than co-operation. In 2018, some 73% of students reported that it seemed 'very' or 'extremely true' to them that students were competing against*

*each other, whereas only 61% said they observed co-operation among students.*

*Students report more often being exposed to bullying in Scotland than on average across OECD countries and economies (index of 0.23 for a basis 0 on average). A larger share of students are bullied frequently (11.4% compared to 7.8%)."*<sup>7</sup>

The issues of life satisfaction, feeling of competition versus co-operation, and the incidence and impact of bullying point to one of the realities that is all-too-often obscured or missed entirely by much research and discussion relating to education: our schools are reflections of our society and they are evermore platforms for social welfare rather than education. In Austerity Scotland 2021, schools feed children not just ideas but calories and take on a huge amount of work that previously would have been seen to fall to social work, youth work, and other health support services. Due to the ongoing cull of public services, schools are increasingly seen as the panacea for the delivery of the social justice agenda. They are given an impossible task and criticised when they fail to achieve it.

I would argue the points raised thus far already make the case for a wholesale re-

evaluation of the current processes and practices of education in Scotland, but let me close this article with what I believe is the most compelling reason of all.

## EDUCATION POLICY IN A CLIMATE EMERGENCY

GRETA THUNBERG, AMONG others, has been doing an excellent job of pointing out that in many ways one of the greatest dangers facing the world now is not just the continued inaction of governments to address climate emergency and wider inequality and suffering, it is the ‘pretence’ that steps are being taken which are in any sense adequate to address the scale of the crisis. “Build back better. Blah, blah, blah. Green economy. Blah blah blah. Net zero by 2050. Blah, blah, blah,” she said in a speech to the Youth4Climate summit in Milan, Italy, this year. “This is all we hear from our so-called leaders. Words that sound great but so far have not led to action. Our hopes and ambitions drown in their empty promises.”<sup>8</sup>

I see echoes of this active inaction in Scottish education’s dalliance with what is termed Learning for Sustainability (LfS). LfS plays host to a mind-boggling array of fascinating subjects as the above left word cloud attests.

Learning for Sustainability is also now an integral element of the General Teaching Council of Scotland’s professional values.<sup>9</sup> The rhetoric is that LfS is delivered in a holistic way across all schools and at all levels. The reality is that this is as fanciful as believing Net Zero targets are anything other than glorified greenwash.

A great deal of what LfS represents and the quality of the learning and thinking behind its existence is to be applauded. My concern is that putting so many crucial issues – such as political

literacy, issues of peace and conflict, global citizenship, understanding interdependence, and tackling climate change, etc. – in to one tickbox makes these issues seem peripheral to the purposes of mainstream education rather than its central priorities.

It is only by mainlining the adoption of degrowth education<sup>10</sup> that Scotland can begin to move to systems of educational practice that begin to address the multiple emergencies we face. The current focus around degrowth and economic transition, however, is too often set against challenges of moving our economies out of growth and fossil fuel dependency. This underplays the fact that the central transformation we require at a global level is in our hearts and minds. The political right understand this and have successfully overseen the complete capitulation of the curriculum to the market. Bringing the curriculum back in to actual public ownership needs to be central to any strategic approach – not just bringing humanity back from the brink but setting us on a new path altogether. For while our education system is ostensibly a ‘public service’, it has been hijacked by neoliberal, market-orientated perspectives. The result of this process can perhaps be more clearly identified in England and we cannot allow the same catastrophe to befall the system in Scotland.

We can learn how to read and write while we learn right from wrong. We can learn how to count as we learn to understand what counts when it comes to bringing a fairer more ecologically balanced world in to being. While we remain in the imaginary of curricula captured by the market, placing competition above co-operation, pushing fairy tales of growth and technofixes for the world’s dilemmas, there is no space for progress, much less for transformation.

The good news is that if we are to tackle climate change then it means we must address climate justice. If we are to address climate justice, we

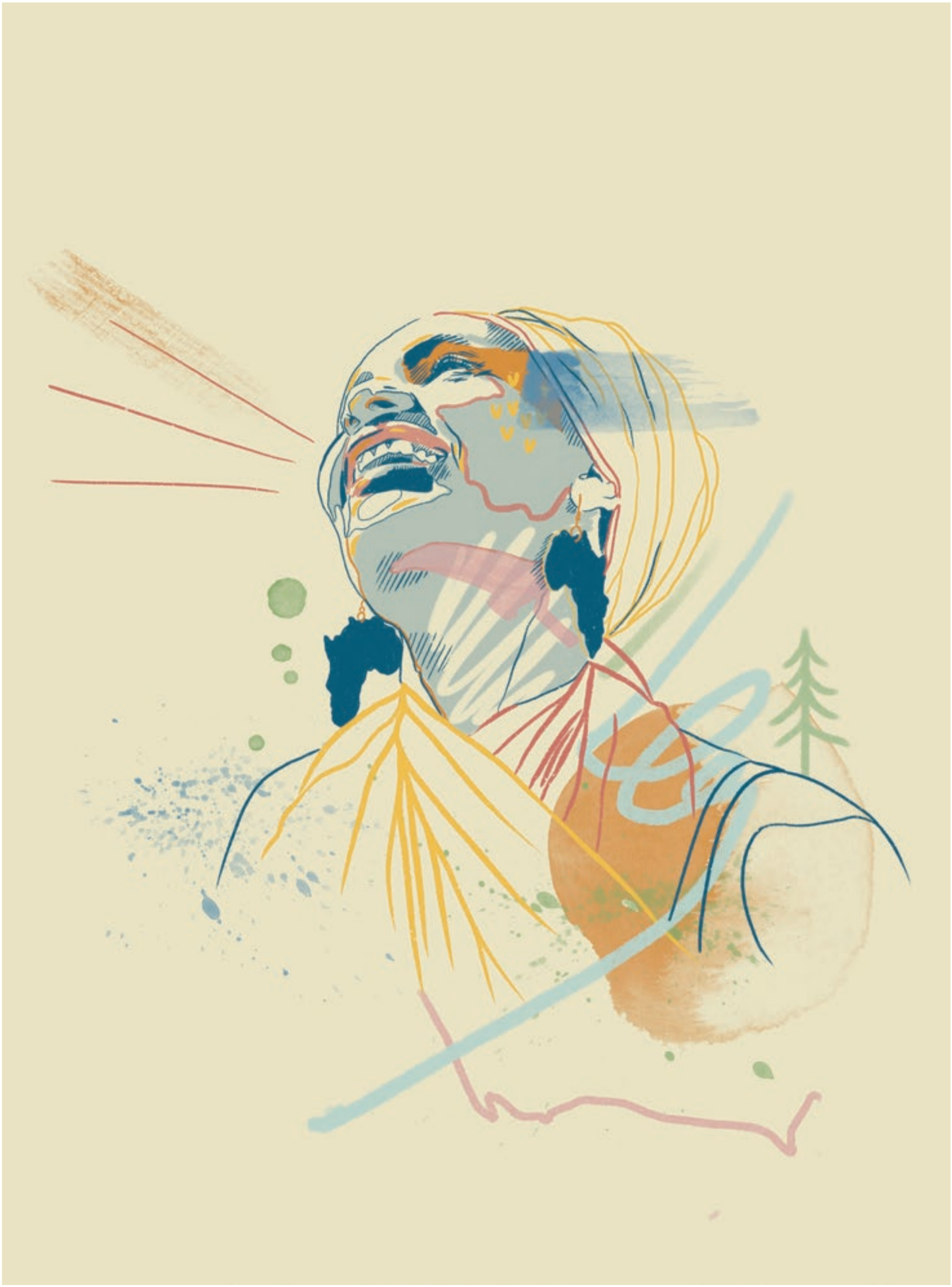
## Notes

- 1 Scottish Government (2021) ‘Education reform consultation’. Available at: [gov.scot/news/education-reform-consultation/](http://gov.scot/news/education-reform-consultation/)
- 2 OECD (2021) ‘Scotland’s Curriculum for Excellence’. Available at: [oecd-ilibrary.org/education/scotland-s-curriculum-for-excellence\\_bf624417-en](http://oecd-ilibrary.org/education/scotland-s-curriculum-for-excellence_bf624417-en)
- 3 OECD (2015) ‘Improving Schools in Scotland: An OECD Perspective’. Available at: [oecd.org/education/school/improving-schools-in-scotland.htm](http://oecd.org/education/school/improving-schools-in-scotland.htm)
- 4 James McEnaney (2021) *Class Rules: The Truth about Scottish Schools*. Edinburgh: Luath Press. See: [luath.co.uk/product/class-rules](http://luath.co.uk/product/class-rules)
- 5 *Teach the Future*: [teachthefuture.uk](http://teachthefuture.uk)
- 6 *Upstart*: [upstart.scot/reasons/](http://upstart.scot/reasons/)
- 7 OECD (2021) ‘Scotland’s Curriculum for Excellence’, p.27. Available at: [oecd-ilibrary.org/education/scotland-s-curriculum-for-excellence\\_bf624417-en](http://oecd-ilibrary.org/education/scotland-s-curriculum-for-excellence_bf624417-en)
- 8 Damian Carrington (2021) ‘Blah, blah, blah’: Greta Thunberg lambasts leaders over climate crisis’, *The Guardian*, 28 September. Available at: [theguardian.com/environment/2021/sep/28/blah-greta-thunberg-leaders-climate-crisis-co2-emissions](http://theguardian.com/environment/2021/sep/28/blah-greta-thunberg-leaders-climate-crisis-co2-emissions)
- 9 The General Teaching Council for Scotland > Professional Standards: [gtcs.org.uk/professional-standards/professional-standards.aspx](http://gtcs.org.uk/professional-standards/professional-standards.aspx)
- 10 Nadine Kaufmann, Christoph Sanders, & Julian Wortmann (2019) ‘Building new foundations: the future of education from a degrowth perspective’, *Sustainability Science* 14, pp.931–941. Available at: [link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11625-019-00699-4](http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11625-019-00699-4)

must address colonialism. To address colonialism, we must be anti-racist and anti-capitalist. Above all, we must address the patriarchal nature of global society and the intersectionality of oppressions that have distorted the human condition for centuries. By addressing these systemic causes of injustice, we undermine the case for militarism and war. These are the stakes at play in our classrooms, homes, and communities. We need an education system focussed on the task of reimagining a better future, not on standardised testing and league tables. ■

*As a member of the newly established Anti-Capitalist Education Network, I am part of a group working to bring the curriculum back in to public ownership. You can join us and share your views at: [ace-network.co.uk](http://ace-network.co.uk)*

*“Due to the ongoing cull of public services, schools are increasingly seen as the panacea for the delivery of the social justice agenda. They are given an impossible task and criticised when they fail to achieve it.”*



# THE COP AND COMMUNITY STRUGGLES IN SOUTH AFRICA

LESS editor Svenja Meyerricks spoke to environmental justice activist and community organiser in Johannesburg, South Africa, about her work and advocacy for solutions that centre the needs of vulnerable communities where the impact of climate change is acutely felt.

Illustrations by Jacqueline Briggs.

**W**HEN I FIRST met Nomalizo in a German ecovillage we both were visiting, she taught a group of permaculture students to sing 'Shosholozu', a South African mining song that had become a protest anthem of black communities in the anti-apartheid struggle. Nomalizo's transmission of the song was an electrifying experience for everyone present – the ongoing community struggle behind it was palpable. Ever since, I have been following Nomalizo's campaigning work in Johannesburg from a distance. I reconnected with her on a video call to talk about the COP and her climate justice activism.

**Nomalizo works for Earthlife Africa<sup>1</sup>, a South African environmental justice organisation that initially played a radical activist role as part of the anti-nuclear movement. Nowadays, Earthlife Africa's work is focused on energy and climate change.**

NX: About 90% of our energy is being produced from coal, which contributes most to greenhouse gases, and 5% from nuclear energy. We advocate for renewable energy and a Just Transition through our labour movement. We really want to push businesses that are focused on profit-making, but we also need our government to have the political will to also push for change through a Just Transition to a low-carbon economy.

**As renewable technology is not yet widely available, it is more difficult for South Africa to move away from extractivist energy industries. Communities living near new mining developments are not sufficiently informed about their risks and health hazards, and displaced from their land and ways of life.**

NX: In South Africa, about 30% of youth are unemployed. So when they introduced nuclear energy they promised the youth jobs, because they know that everyone is vulnerable, everyone needs jobs. And there won't be any new jobs, and what about the livelihoods of people who are farming and living an Indigenous life? – because when they build a new [nuclear or coal] power station people will be moved from one area to another so that those big industries can come in and open a new mine. These new developments impact people in different ways – at times people who are used to living on a farm in an open space are being relocated and clustered in a small township.

Because people are hungry, and people are vulnerable, that's when people will say, 'Yes, we really need this' – not understanding the impacts and the externalities of all those things that coal and nuclear energy industries are promising.

**The communities Nomalizo and other Earthlife Africa activists**

**are working with are already experiencing the impact of climate change.**

NX: They are now feeling it, because in South Africa we have a problem with water. So as you can imagine, if we have a water problem then that means food security is going to be a problem. And then that means our health is at risk.

**Earthlife Africa's role is to distribute information, and to empower communities they work with to come up with their own solutions to the challenges they are facing, especially in relation to climate change and energy. Their popular education initiatives in communities facing large-scale coal and nuclear energy developments support residents to make well-informed decisions about whether to accept or reject these new developments.**

NX: We work in different provinces – in Limpopo Province, where the new coal mines are proposed; and we also work in the Eastern Cape, where the new nuclear power plant was supposed to be built. We keep sensitising the community and doing education, letting them know what is new, so that they have an understanding [of the impacts of these energy industries] and can make a sound decision. Our government and businesses do the environmental impact assessment and public consultations, but they don't do the community

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PEOPLE <sup>before</sup> PROFIT!

RENEWABLE  
ENERGY

PEOPLES POWER

CLIMATE JUSTICE  
NOW!

outreach whereby you tell the people what is it that you come in with.

We organise people, we mobilise people, we tell them about this. And then we make a lot of noise! We tweet about it, we raise awareness, and people are able to engage and talk about it, and reject what must be rejected.

Communities are the ones who have solutions. It's just that our government doesn't take them seriously; they don't take them into consideration. People's Indigenous knowledge is so great. It just needs a political will to say, 'Yes, this must be pushed forward. Let us listen to the people; let us stop lying to the people. Let us tell people the truth, so that people can make their own choice.'

**Nomalizo explains how population displacement across the African continent through the impacts of climate change is further brought into tension by the false promise of employment opportunities in South Africa.**

NX: South Africans feel that [people from other African countries] are coming to take their jobs. But those people didn't come because they wanted to take their jobs. They came here because they're running away – because Africa, further north, it's dry. So if the place is not conducive for you to live, you move, thinking that they will find a better place to live here. This was a focus of our climate march in 2017 – that, in some places in South Africa, we are now seeing climate refugees.

**We speak about LESS's focus on degrowth and decolonisation, and the need to degrow some sectors so that there can be enough for all. I ask Nomalizo what this means in a South African context.**

NX: We push to say we really need renewable energy, but not in the sense that a big company from China will come and install renewable energy and do maintenance, and then people must pay that company for services. We need renewable energy that is community owned and community-driven – that the community will have a say in

it. That will be much better for communities – to create their own jobs for their own people.

And that will also assist in empowering the youth, and empowering communities in different areas.

What we normally do is we mobilise women. I also work on gender justice, so we know that women are the ones who are carrying the burden at the end of the day; they are the most vulnerable to climate change and [extractivist energy developments]. So we also advocate for gender equality, and we mobilise women on the issues of climate change – we provide support, and especially engage those who are coming from marginalised communities. We assist them so that they are able to engage with the government on implementing climate change mitigation and adaptation policies. That's why I always work with different community organisations. They might choose to protest because we help them by raising environmental awareness.

**Our conversation shifts to the question of land, who owns it, and whose voices are heard or silenced.**

NX: There are a lot of communities that are pushing for their Indigenous life to be recognised and also their rights to land, and also pushing for their rights to be recognised as it is in our South African constitution. Remember, most of the land in South Africa is not owned by South Africans, so South Africans are not seen as the custodians of South Africa – all we really need is to be recognised as Indigenous people of South Africa. Land is mostly owned by investors – people in Europe, America, Asia – and these days in Europe people let us think that they lease the land, that they don't own it. So we are still fighting for land rights.

**Ten years ago, COP17 took place in Durban, South Africa. Since then, the majority of UN Climate Change Conferences (UNFCCC) have taken place in the global north. While no**

**legally binding agreement to reduce carbon emissions was made in Durban, the summit was an important step in the process towards forging the Paris Agreement in 2015.<sup>2</sup> I ask Nomalizo about her experience of protesting at COP17 .**

NX: It was like the Corporation of the Parties; [COP] was only corporations. It was not representing people; it was only representing businesses. Our electricity supplier here is Eskom. So with Eskom and Sasol being the biggest polluters, how can they be part of the negotiators at COP? Because we don't need people who are degrading our environment to be the one who also goes to that table and talks about change – they know that they're not going to change anything; they are only concerned with profit, not people and the environment. So in 2011, we were saying this was not for us. It doesn't represent us. And we were demanding climate justice, because if there's no justice, then it's just business as usual.

There was an agreement to say there will be a Green Climate Fund, which is still just a name – developed countries were supposed to fund that. They pledged to say they will contribute. But even today, it's a drop in the ocean. So yes, we were happy to say at least there's something that we came out with, to say there will be reparation, developed countries will assist developing countries. But when you check, that is still far from happening.

We managed to organise a lot of people – but not everything that we hoped for happened. With our government, after COP, we started seeing development – wind turbines, solar panels, and all that. We've seen that it's starting to happen, even though it's still a little, it's at a very slow pace – but we're getting there, as long as the community can push for change.

**With added restrictions during the pandemic, it has become even more difficult for climate justice campaigners who work with those most affected by the impacts of climate change to**

**make their voice heard at the talks. Now that the UNFCCC meets for the 26th time, what will communities at the frontline of the impacts of climate change be doing?**

NX: During COP26, our director will be in Glasgow. And then we will be having our week of action here in South Africa – we will be doing popular workshops on climate change, and also updating people on what is happening in Glasgow, and for the whole week we'll be having our small meetings with different community activists. And on the 10th of December it's International Human Rights Day. We will have a big march – we are expecting around 4,000 people to say we are aware of climate change and we need climate justice now. Normally when we do it, we will go to different financial institutions that are investing in fossil fuels that contribute most to greenhouse gases. We will go to the banks who are funding the mining of fossil fuels such as coal. And then we'll end our march at the Constitutional Court to give them the memorandum saying we feel that our rights to a healthy and clean and safe environment are being violated.

We are pushing very hard for a Just Transition to reduce fossil fuels and use renewables as an alternative in South Africa. The government is also talking about a Just Transition, and we are waiting to see what they say when they are in Glasgow. Because it's easy to say things, but when they come back to implement what they've said, it's not what they do in the country."

**I ask Nomalizo if she has a message for Glasgow.**

NX: For this year our message is that we globally need a Just Transition to a low carbon economy. And globally, we need to change everything that we're doing that is not environmentally friendly.

Only ordinary people can push for change, because they are not looking for profit. ■

**Notes**

1 [earthlife.org.za](http://earthlife.org.za)

2 Lean, G. (2021) 'Glasgow's COP26 is crunch time to save the world from disaster'. Accessed on 26/10/21 from: [opendemocracy.net/en/glasgows-cop-26-is-crunch-time-to-save-the-world-from-disaster/](https://opendemocracy.net/en/glasgows-cop-26-is-crunch-time-to-save-the-world-from-disaster/)

# UNLEARNING EMPIRE ~ RE-MEMBERING EARTH

Vishwam Heckert  
explores how we move  
beyond empire and  
imperialism, abstraction  
and disconnection:  
“...if we wish to transform  
our world, we cannot  
do so without unlearning  
the embodied and psychic  
habit of separating  
‘us’ and ‘them’ or ‘me’  
from the ‘world’.”  
Art by Megan Chapman.

*You do not have to be good.  
You do not have to walk on  
your knees  
for a hundred miles through  
the desert repenting.  
You only have to let the soft  
animal of your body  
love what it loves.*  
– Mary Oliver, Wild Geese

SITTING IN THE garden here in Cupar, drinking in this late September warmth, a familiar sound draws my gaze to the flight path above – not of aeroplanes, but wild geese wending their way south for winter. I love their dynamically shifting V-formations, supporting each other in their long journey home. The way they listen to the wind with their wings, following the flow that guides them on their way, makes my heart sing.

I’m also inspired to remember that the ancient ancestors of these beautiful geese also faced extinction. Rather than disappearing as we once thought, we now know that some of the dinosaurs found their wings. They adapted to changing conditions, discovering hidden depths of capacity within themselves.

In these times, there is little doubt that once again the Earth is calling on us all to evolve – to find new forms for living together. And we can see this isn’t easy. Change seems to bring fear and resistance. That is to be expected.

The secret of flight seems to lie in becoming empty. Even the bones of birds are hollow, giving them lift.

WE MIGHT SEE ourselves as children of empire, either rebelling against or obedient to (two sides of the same coin) a belief that a particular way of living is advanced, superior, and unquestionably right. We might see how this pattern becomes embodied in our

movements, our emotional responses, and our ways of thinking. And yet, somehow its grasp is never complete.

For before, during, and after empire, here is the Earth. We are first and foremost of the Earth and anything we have learned from empire, we can unlearn. Not simply with our intellect but with our whole being. In unlearning, we allow ourselves to evolve. Not by force, not by strategy, not by grandeur, but through gentleness, simplicity, and community.

This transformation of our culture is so critical, it can’t be rushed. Instead, we might honour the value and power of gentleness, of slowing down and of allowing ourselves to be transformed from within by the power of life itself. This inner transformation seems to be essential to the outer cultural shift we are all desperately hoping for.

The wing muscles of the wild geese are strong, it’s true. But it’s the sensitivity of the feathers that lets them follow the wind. It’s the humility of their hearts that allows them to take turns leading. No one is in front in order to impress the others, but to support them just as that one has been supported by the others.

DISCONNECTION IS BOTH the root and the fruit of empire. There can be no hierarchy without separation, no ‘other’ to conquer and control. For anyone to draw lines on a map or between kinds of people, effectively declaring some lives are more important than others relies on the imagination that Life is fragmented, that the Earth is not a singular being. Of course, we each have our own wonderful and distinctive way of being in the world. Life is beautifully diverse. And it is all deeply connected.

When viewed through the lens of empire, life seems to be distorted. Even the teachings of the nice young man 2,000 years ago who said simply “love each other” somehow became justification for Crusades and sectarian violence when translated through the world-view of the Roman Empire.<sup>1</sup> If we wish to transform our world, we cannot do

*“In undoing or emptying, we discover a fullness, a great beauty and sense of wonderment, much as ‘degrowth’ invites us to grow in ways that aren’t just about money but are about the wholeness of life. Until we empty ourselves of our need for more, we’ll never discover the richness that we already are.”*

so without unlearning the embodied and psychic habit of separating ‘us’ and ‘them’ or ‘me’ from the ‘world’.

We might now choose to replace the word empire with trauma and see how it still makes sense. Empire seems abstract, maybe distant. Trauma is intimate and embodied. But the patterns are the same.<sup>2</sup> Empire is both cause and result of intergenerational trauma. My Oglala Lakota relative Edwina Brown Bull<sup>3</sup> of Pine Ridge Reservation speaks powerfully of this when she talks of the history of boarding schools for indigenous people as part of the genocidal policies of the US (and Canadian) governments which we are hearing about now in the news.

*“It’s important to understand that Federal Indian Policy played a major role in not only dismantling who we were as a people, but the land and the boarding schools were all a part of the Federal Indian Policy that were an attempt to assimilate the indigenous people to be ... [weighted pause] emotion just struck me ... it was an attempt for us to be something that they wanted us to be. [...] As I’m learning more about the Federal Indian Policy and the impact it had on everything – every part of our indigenous nations – the one thing I have to remind myself is that they can only do to us what was already done to them. So when I say that statement, I’m looking at it not from a victim standpoint but more from a place of seeing that there was trauma within them in order for those to acts to happen to us. [There was trauma at] all levels from governmental to personal – all those levels!”<sup>4</sup>*

I love her deep sense of compassion, of recognising the suffering of those she might be tempted to call an enemy. But she does not. She sees only human beings, being human. And she knows that compassion is key to all healing, all beneficial ➤



one  
pigeon wing  
to  
tether  
a ghost's  
heart

change. Including, perhaps especially, compassion for ourselves. Notice how she saw that emotion struck her while she spoke and how she embraced it with compassion before continuing. Decolonisation, we might say, is a profound process of recovery from trauma and a re-opening to the fullness, wholeness, and beauty of life.

A parallel trauma still exists within the elite of Scottish (and British) society where young children are separated from families and sent to boarding school. Here they are not encouraged to be who they are... but to be something that others want them to be. For empire to continue, domination must be taught. And for it to end, it must be unlearned – not just intellectually, but in our whole being. Having worked both collaboratively and therapeutically with individuals sent to such schools, I can say the effect of the trauma is palpable. And yet, there is also great beauty and resilience. I have learned so much from boarding school survivors in Scotland and among the Lakota.

Edwina's insights also tie in with recent scientific research which shows the biochemical signs of trauma exist equally within those we might call perpetrators and those we might call victims.<sup>5</sup> Everyone is tangled up together in the same mess and we can only come untangled together. This is not to disregard the benefits of privilege by any means, but rather to recognise that material and social privilege is not the same as emotional wellbeing and a healthy sense of place in the world.

We all handle trauma differently. Many of us learn to survive by thinking to ourselves "it wasn't that bad" and focussing our attention on what we might think of as "bigger problems". Others get very caught up in the trauma, holding it close and making it an identity. We might say we have nothing to lose but our chains, but what if our chains are

how we make sense of the world?

When we look closely at these big questions – like decolonisation, degrowth, and decarbonisation (i.e. transforming the foundation of our whole way of life), we might see that they are made up of a whole lot of smaller questions about our every day lives. It's not logical to say we can have a healthy, sustainable, and equitable culture in Scotland without nurturing the conditions which allow the healing of the traumas that keep us feeling disconnected in various ways. That would be a bit like trying to help an ecosystem recover without tenderly nurturing the plants and animals...

MANY OF THE great spiritual traditions teach that to heal the wounds we carry with us and to be of greater service to humanity and our whole planet, we might choose the path of becoming empty, like wild geese. In the Oglala Lakota tradition, we see very clearly how this supports a non-capitalist way of life:

***We are called to become hollow bones for our people and anyone else we can help, and we are not supposed to seek power for our personal use and honor. What we bones really become is the pipeline that connects Wakan-Tanka, the Helpers and the community***

***“Capitalism depends very much on the suppression of our connection with life, with our bodies, with our pain, and with our healing. We’re invited, instead, to distract ourselves endlessly with either working or consuming.”***

***together. This tells us the direction our curing and healing work must follow and establishes the kind of life we must lead. It also keeps us working at things that do not bring us much income. So we have to be strong and committed to stick with this, otherwise we will get very little spiritual power, and we will probably give up the curing and healing work.***<sup>6</sup>

– Frank Fools Crow,  
Oglala Lakota Holy Man

Here Fools Crow describes a radical openness to life and to Spirit – to listening to what is guiding us to serve others rather than become focussed on our selves.

In the Christian tradition, becoming 'hollow bones' is called kenosis (self-emptying). Rather than seeing Jesus as an authority to be obeyed (Roman Empire translation), we might see him as a great wisdom teacher who demonstrated a mystical path of becoming empty much as Lakota, Buddhist, Yoga, and other traditions teach. When we see the word mystical, we might think it's something airy-fairy, but this work is profoundly practical for healing the patterns of empire/trauma within and around us. Cynthia Bourgeault<sup>7</sup> describes a simple three-step process inspired by his teachings sometimes called 'The Welcoming Prayer'. First we simply observe any sensation in our body which is tight, or holding, in any way. Common areas include bottom, belly, shoulders, and jaw. Maybe you notice some areas holding now? Perhaps our usual way of operating is to try to banish anything we don't like from our experience or just grit our teeth and bear it. This practice offers another way. Instead, we start by simply "*acknowledging* what is going on internally during a distressing physical or emotional situation, '*welcoming*' it, and *letting it go*" (p172, original emphasis). In other

words, letting the soft animal of your body relax and embrace being present in this living moment.

My teacher's teacher in Yoga, Swami Satchidananda, also advocated a kind of kenosis which he called Undoism.<sup>8</sup>

***People often ask me, “What religion are you? You talk about the Bible, Koran, Torah. Are you a Hindu?” I say, “I am not a Catholic, a Buddhist, or a Hindu, but an Undo. My religion is Undoism. We have done enough damage. We have to stop doing any more and simply undo the damage we have already done.***

Unlearning empire, unlearning separation, unlearning identifying with categories that keep us apart ... undoing the damage we have done and recognising ourselves as integral with Nature, with Life Itself. Through the practices of Yoga (including breathing, meditation, postures, awareness of the mental patterns, community and devotion to something which is greater than ourselves) or similar paths of healing and transformation, we find our sense of separation becoming thinner as we come undone.

In undoing or emptying, we discover a fullness, a great beauty and sense of wonderment, much as 'degrowth' invites us to grow in ways that aren't just about money but are about the wholeness of life. Until we empty ourselves of our need for more, we'll never discover the richness that we already are. Capitalism depends very much on the suppression of our connection with life, with our bodies, with our pain, and with our healing. We're invited, instead, to distract ourselves endlessly with either working or consuming. Simply being, breathing, enjoying what life brings to us and those around us, gently undermines the structures of empire/trauma that hold us frozen in a pattern that

*“We are first and foremost of the Earth and anything we have learned from empire, we can unlearn. Not simply with our intellect but with our whole being. In unlearning, we allow ourselves to evolve.”*

can only lead to collapse. Instead of that road, we might instead choose the radical self-care that enables us to remember that our place here on Earth is valuable, our unique contributions needed, and our healing that is the foundation of all of that.

Through emptying, we find our inner world becoming quieter and more peaceful. It is only when we are quiet inside that we might really listen. We can listen to each other in a way that allows for real community, real healing, real transformation. We can listen to that quiet inner voice of intuitive conscience that guides us to the most helpful words and deeds. We might even find we can listen to the earth, to the trees, to other beings in ways our culture tells us is impossible. For indigenous cultures, however, it is perfectly natural to listen to the trees.

***I too was a stranger at first in this dark dripping forest perched at the edge of the sea, but I sought out an elder, my Sitka Spruce grandmother with a lap wide enough for many grandchildren. I introduced myself, told her my name and why I had come. I offered her tobacco from my pouch and asked if I might visit in her community for a time. She asked me to sit down, and there was a place right between her roots.***<sup>9</sup>

Meanwhile, modern science is only just beginning to see how much the trees speak to each other.<sup>10</sup> As we all evolved together, made of the same stuff, is it so hard to imagine that we might also listen to the trees and they to us? If we wish to develop a sustainable way of life, listening to the teachings of indigenous people (including the folk wisdom and old tales of our own indigenous ancestors here in Scotland) and finding our own direct connection with the land around us is invaluable.

THROUGH INDIVIDUAL AND collective practices of healing, our relationships are transformed: with ourselves, each other, the land, and whatever word we might like to use for the Infinite. The great anarchist Gustav Landauer pointed to this as the essence of revolution, for no institution is a transcendental being, above and beyond every day life. “The state”, he wrote, “is a social relationship; a certain way of people relating to one another. It can be destroyed by creating new social relationships; i.e., by people relating to one another differently.”<sup>11</sup> Following indigenous teachings and great eco-mystics like Mary Oliver, Kathleen Jamie, Nan Shepard, and John Muir, we might expand this to include our relationships with trees and mountains, with earthworms and songbirds, with healing herbs and clear running waters.

We might look to the inspiring radical herbal health project known as Grass Roots Remedies.<sup>12</sup> They are a workers’ cooperative, inspired by Permaculture principles, who are organically growing, harvesting, preparing, and distributing herbal medicine through public outreach projects, online sales, shops, and at their low-cost herbal clinics in Wester Hailes and Granton. The team focus on plants that grow wild in Scotland, rather than importing herbs which may be endangered by over-harvesting, and teach self-care

through earth connection, just as indigenous cultures (including in Scotland) have always done.

We are also blessed in Scotland to host a number of forest gardens, which demonstrate a very different relationship with land than we see in most domesticated home gardens or in industrial agriculture. Some are inspired by permaculture principals – including Graham Bell and Nancy Woodhead’s ‘Garden Cottage’ in Coldream,<sup>13</sup> Euan Sutherland’s ‘Rowan Refuge’<sup>14</sup> in Glasgow,<sup>15</sup> or Alan Carter’s forest garden allotment in Aberdeen.<sup>16</sup> Meanwhile, Rosa Stepanova and James MacKenzie’s ‘impossible garden’ in Shetland is inspired by her memories of growing up in the Black Forest and their shared passion for wildlife, beauty, and ecological diversity. Back in the Borders, Bird Gardens Scotland is reforesting and hosting programmes for conservation breeding of rare species of wild and domesticated birds.<sup>17</sup> These gardens produce tremendous yields not only in terms of foodstuffs (Graham and Nancy regularly harvest 1.25 tons of food in a year on a fifth of an acre) but in space for wildlife to thrive and for human visitors to be inspired by what is possible with care, planning, and a love of nature.

If we wish to continue the thread of this essay in taking inspiration from indigenous cultures, we might look also to the Landback movement in North America and elsewhere to return land to indigenous stewardship and collective liberation.<sup>18</sup> While the Scottish government’s support for community buyouts is laudable, we might like to set our sights on deeper transformation as we collectively consider the opportunities provided by Scottish independence. We might ask, what could Landback look like here?

Maybe we don’t need to know what the future holds, but simply to

#### Notes

- 1 See e.g. Cynthia Bourgeault (2008) *The Wisdom Jesus: Transforming Heart and Mind – A New Perspective on Christ and His Message*. New Seeds Books
- 2 See e.g. Thomas Hübl (2020) *Healing Collective Trauma: A process for integrating our intergenerational and cultural wounds*. Sounds True: Boulder, CO.
- 3 Edwina calls me her relative and I call her mine because in the Lakota philosophy Mitákuye Oyás’iŋ (All Are Related). She and I are working together as part of a wider team at Pine Ridge Reservation, South Dakota, with the Heart Of Living Yoga Foundation to share heart-centred yoga and meditation practices for the healing of Native Nations.
- 4 Edwina Fire Thunder Brown Bull (2021) Available at: [youtu.be/HuFLWDmrK6Y?t=2946](https://youtu.be/HuFLWDmrK6Y?t=2946) (Viewed live 3rd October 2021)
- 5 Thomas Hübl *ibid*
- 6 Thomas Mails (1991) *Fools Crow: Wisdom and Power*. Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska Press, p.38.
- 7 Thomas Mails *ibid*
- 8 Swami Sachidananda (1977) *Beyond Words*. Integral Yoga Publications, p.85. Available at: [lightinnerlight.com/wp-content/uploads/Beyond-Words-PDF.pdf](https://lightinnerlight.com/wp-content/uploads/Beyond-Words-PDF.pdf) (Accessed 2nd October 2021)
- 9 Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013) *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*. Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, p.206
- 10 Suzanne Simard (2021) *Finding the Mother Tree: Discovering the Wisdom of the Forest*. London: Allen Lane.
- 11 Gabriel Kuhn (2010) *Gustav Landauer: Revolution and Other Writings*. London: PM Press, p.214
- 12 Grass Roots Remedies: [grassrootsremedies.co.uk](https://grassrootsremedies.co.uk) (Accessed 2nd October 2021)
- 13 Forest Garden, garden visited in person in March and June 2021: [grahambell.org/garden-cottage](https://grahambell.org/garden-cottage) (Accessed 2nd October 2021)
- 14 Rowan Refuge, garden visited in person in August 2021: [rowanrefuge.wordpress.com](https://rowanrefuge.wordpress.com) (Accessed 2nd October 2021)
- 15 Food Forest In Your Garden: [foodforest.garden/about-the-garden](https://foodforest.garden/about-the-garden) (Accessed 2nd October 2021)
- 16 Rosa Stepanova (2004) *The Impossible Garden*. Lerwick: Shetland Times. Garden visited in person in July 2021 – video tour available here: [youtube.com/watch?v=RrAytrzdU3Q](https://youtube.com/watch?v=RrAytrzdU3Q)
- 17 Bird Gardens Scotland CIC, garden visited in person in August 2021: [birdgardensscotland.com](https://birdgardensscotland.com) (Accessed 3rd October 2021)
- 18 Land Back: [landback.org](https://landback.org) (Accessed 2nd October 2021)

focus on deepening our connection with the Earth, with Life, and supporting each other to find our wings. Let’s see how we fly! ■

**The conversation on our collective survival is utterly alienating and disempowering for the vast majority of people. The climate movement's biggest task is helping all people see they have a role to play.**



**The 'one big moment' narrative of COP26, the complete and intentional dislocation of most people from the process, the sense of 'but what can I do?' belies the fact that our chances to respond to climate breakdown don't come in a cycle of big events. They come every day, every time we encounter the corrosive logic of growth at work – every planning decision, every procurement policy, every community facility condemned to closure or privatised delivery.**

**Capitalism can feel like a totality. It can also be seen as a systemic pattern emerging from the repetition of actions, structures and decisions underpinned by logics of accumulation, extraction and expansion. And this is where it gets hopeful – it's recognising that the tangible places to get to work are everywhere and belong to everyone. It is the power of all people reclaiming their agency over what most impacts their life and connecting these struggles to climate breakdown – it is this that has transformative potential.**

