

Hugo Chavez dead: we look back at the life of the leader of Venezuela's Bolivarian revolution.

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Downgrade Britain: what does the UK's new 'AA' credit rating mean?

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Scottish Socialist Voice

by Ken Ferguson

AS this *Voice* goes to press, there is less than a month to go until 95,000 Scots face the trauma of the Westminster Coalition's assault on their living standards, with the already detested Bedroom Tax.

As this blatant attack on the most vulnerable - 70 per cent of Scots impacted by it are disabled, for example - slashes their already meagre benefits, the story on the other side of the tracks is rather different.

While the Tories and their Lib Dem lapdogs cut benefits for the vulnerable, they are also cutting taxes for the top earners from 50p to 45p in the pound. The reality of this is that a millionaire will be handed a tax cut worth an EXTRA £107,000 a year as the victims of their class based Bedroom Tax scabble to survive.

Class war

Elsewhere in this *Voice*, we take a detailed look at the Bedroom Tax and the gathering resistance to it. We make no bones about it. The Bedroom Tax is blatant class war waged by the millionaires cabinet to cut a billion pounds from the housing benefit budget. It must be scrapped.

However, the thousands at the sharp end need help now and it is within the powers of the Scottish Government to deliver it. The demand of campaigners backed by the STUC that rent arrears be made a civil debt which means they will not lead to evictions should be enacted

SCRAP THE BEDROOM TAX

95,000 SCOTS TARGETED - HOLYROOD MUST ACT

without delay. This would not only bring some relief to the victims of Bedroom Tax but would also be a powerful signal of the different priorities of the Scottish and Westminster parliaments.

It would also be a real boost to those fighting for a Yes vote next year in order to finally end the prospect of Tory rule and

their attacks on the many on behalf of the fat cat few.

Resistance

Likewise, local councils and social landlords should emulate Knowsley Council in Merseyside and re-designate houses to a smaller size to avoid the tax. They should also

pledge not to evict tenants facing debt through the Westminster attacks.

Resistance is spreading and growing to this detested tax and all steps from legal challenges to direct action to halt evictions must be on the agenda. Scrap the Bedroom Tax and vote Yes to scrap Tory rule!



INCREASING THE PRESSURE: an SSP protest took the fight to North Ayrshire Council this week PHOTO: Ian Wallace

BED TAX DEMO: SAT 30 MARCH GLASGOW 11am George Sq | EDINBURGH 12 noon St Andrew Sq

A No vote doesn't make sense

by Alan Bissett

WE'RE used to being told about the apocalypse which might visit us after Scottish independence, but what's talked about far less - deliberately, of course - are the enormous risks of a No vote.

While the No campaign can only speculate about what might befall an independent Scotland, we can be fairly sure about the future of the UK based on its current climate.

Economically, the UK is going through a slump more protracted than the Great Depression. While we should not place much faith in the prognosis of ratings agencies, it is still telling that the UK has just lost the AAA credit rating which affects its international borrowing rates and which we were told by George Osborne the 'debt reduction' was supposed to protect.

Evident failure

Moody's, the agency which downgraded the UK, has predicted that the UK's economic growth will remain 'sluggish' for the foreseeable future. Despite this evident failure, Osborne has promised to 'stay the course', which in the real world means further savage cuts to the public sector and the living standards of ordinary people.

Labour, it's worth noting, have also pledged to 'ruthlessly' pursue cuts, so there's no point looking to



ALTERNATIVE ALISTAIR? Darling's 'No' camp still haven't shown what they can offer Scotland - apart from more misery...

them, or the busted Lib Dems, for an alternative. So the future of the UK is one of bleak austerity, of which the stealth privatisation of the NHS and the coalition's hated 'Bedroom Tax' are only the beginning.

It's worth pointing out that 91 per cent of Scots MPs voted against the Bedroom Tax - which alone shows our inability to protect ourselves against Westminster - but that Labour's Alastair Darling, Gordon Brown and Ian Davidson, major voices in the 'Better Together' campaign, were not among them.

Politically, Westminster is heading to the right. UKIP coming second place in the Eastleigh by-election, ahead of the Tories, will mean a great deal of anxious re-positioning by the other parties before the

next election. Cameron's promised referendum on an EU exit is a sign of things to come.

It also means, of course, that Scotland now has less chance of staying in the EU if it votes against independence than if it votes for it, the very opposite of what Better Together has been saying all along!

So while the Tories chase UKIP voters, Labour chase Tory voters. Ed Miliband's recent pledge to help the 'squeezed middle' is carefully-packaged Tory language, designed to appeal to *Daily Mail* readers.

References to low-earners, the working class or the unemployed are absent from Labour rhetoric, meaning that it's inconceivable that we'll see a party in Westminster which can deliver for the majority of working people.

Finally, we should ask ourselves why neither Westminster nor the Better Together campaign have revealed an alternative to independence, despite the neutral Electoral Commission insisting that they do so.

There have been veiled references to 'enhanced devolution' with absolutely no detail about what this will involve. This means Westminster has no intention whatsoever of granting Scotland anything in the result of a No vote, for the simple reason that it won't have to.

Cameron fought to exclude Devo Max from the ballot paper for a reason. At the moment, the threat of independence is the only bargaining chip that Scotland has with Westminster.

If we vote No, the sole message that London will hear is: do whatever you like to us, because we don't care enough about ourselves to stop you. This could actually mean a reversal in devolution.

The West Lothian Question, whereby Scots MPs can vote on English-only affairs, and the Barnett Formula, which determines the extent of Scotland's 'grant' from the UK, have long been bugbears for right-wingers in Westminster.

Pressure

Feeling pressure from UKIP, it's very possible that the Tories (or even Labour) may seek to 'correct' these imbalances. At the very least, Scotland will see a lowering of its block grant - under the guise of 'deficit reduction' - meaning there will only be so much Holyrood can do to protect Scotland's NHS and public services.

Whatever might happen, at least with independence Scotland can control its response to a crisis.

With a No vote we cede that control to a government in another country which does not have Scotland's best interests in mind.

That is not democracy and it does not make sense.

Labour have also pledged to 'ruthlessly' pursue cuts - so there's no point looking to them, or the busted Lib Dems, for an alternative...

INDY WORKERS SUPPORT BOOST

by *Richie Venton, Trade Unionists For Independence (TUFU) steering group*

SUPPORT for the aims of TUFU is gathering pace. At it's recent AGM, the civil service union in Cumbernauld Taxes voted for a Motion written and proposed by SSP members in TUFU.

The motion is scathing about the prospects under continued Westminster rule and calls on the PCS union nationally to ensure input to the debates from those who see independence as a means to transform workers' lives through measures such as scrapping the anti-union laws; guaranteeing a decent living wage for all over 16; reversal of all privatisation, and cuts to benefits and public services; job creation through taxation of the rich and big business; scrapping Trident, with guaranteed jobs for all defence industry worker through diversification; extension of democratic public ownership to help establish a poverty-free, clean, green, egalitarian Scotland.

Historic

Over 250 PCS union members voted for it, with only single figures opposed. A similar motion has been submitted for debate at the forthcoming STUC Congress. TUFU members in all unions are arguing for support for it. At its members' AGM, the PCS union branch in East Kilbride Taxes passed a motion along the same lines as that in Cumbernauld, moved by TUFU members, and supported overwhelmingly by the over-600 members in attendance! And in an historic breakthrough, the giant Communications Workers Union Scotland no 2 branch has voted by a 9:1 majority at its AGM in favour of independence and to affiliate to TUFU, in a motion that states: "This Branch recognises that the referendum on Scottish Independence, due to be held in autumn 2014, will be the biggest political decision any of us has been asked to make in our lives. We recognise that under consecutive governments the



TUFU GET GOING: PCS branches pass TUFU motions

gap between rich and poor has widened and that the UK remains one of the most unequal societies in the developed nations of the world.

"We further recognise that round after round of anti trade union legislation, introduced by Tory governments throughout the '80s and '90s remain on the statute book despite 13 years of Labour government 1997-2010. To this end we believe that the only way forward for workers in Scotland is to ensure a YES vote in the referendum and we agree to do all in our power to secure such an outcome. To this end we pledge to:

1. Affiliate to the 'Trade Unionists For Independence' campaign.
2. Give our full support to Yes Scotland and take an active role within the campaign.
3. Initiate debate on the issue at future branch meetings, with invited speakers from both sides of the argument.
4. Consider placing a motion to annual conference calling for support for our position and ensuring the continued unity of postal and other workers throughout the UK and the wider world."

TUFU is a broad, inclusive campaign embracing workers from all parties and none, with the core belief that independence is the best means of radically improving the living conditions of Scotland's working class majority. We see in-

dependence as a means not of just changing flags and emblems, but of giving the Scottish people the democratic opportunity to wield the powers to achieve a fundamental and irreversible redistribution of power and wealth in favour of working people, their families and communities. To build a Scotland where the needs and interests of the working class millions displace the greed and dictatorship of the multinationals and millionaires. Those like Labour MSP Neil Findlay who favour progressive taxation to redistribute wealth should stop peddling the deceitful myth that this can be best achieved under Westminster rule, perhaps with a few extra powers graciously handed down to Holyrood.

Given their real-life track records on Planet Earth, which of the Tories, Lib Dems or New Labour does Neil imagine will pursue such progressive policies? He should instead join TUFU in demanding, as our Statement of Aims includes: "Jobs for all - including through massive public investment in clean, green energy; housing; integrated public transport - paid for by collecting the tax evaded and avoided by big business and the super-rich, and restoration of taxation levels of big business and the rich elite to their historic highest."

Nothing short of the powers that go with independence would allow

repeal of the most repressive package of anti-union laws in western Europe - initiated by Thatcher's Tories, sustained by 13 years of New Labour governments, added to by the current Tory/Lib Dem Coalition with barely a whimper from the timid Labour opposition at Westminster.

Likewise, not even the Devo Max version of Westminster rule favoured by the likes of The Red Paper Collective would allow a Scottish government to tackle the national disgrace of poverty pay. And it's not even a choice on offer in 2014 - just a red-herring for the 'left' face of Unionism. A guaranteed Living Wage for all can only be applied to the public and private sector alike with the powers won through independence. So why would any self-respecting trade unionist vote to keep the limitations of devolution, which would mean the exclusion, for instance, of retail workers from a guaranteed Living Wage, when retail is the nation's second-biggest employer and is notorious for its low pay?

Demonisation

Reversal of privatisation by successive Tory and Labour government; reversal of the assaults on benefits (including abolition of the Bedroom Tax) and an end to demonisation of the sick, disabled and unemployed, with a living income for all those unable to work; these and other concrete measures for an economically and socially just Scotland are way beyond the powers of a devolved semi-parliament.

They require independence, full self-government, granting the Scottish working class the right to elect a government of our own choice, ending the abomination of rule by Westminster governments that we never elected. TUFU appeals to the STUC and individual trade unionists to seize the moment and crusade for a Yes vote so that the trade union agenda of social justice, equality and internationalism can prevail, rather than rule by Westminster governments that all and always put profit before people.

Labour was and is a pro-war party

says John McAllion

THE Labour left has always tried to align itself with the peace movement. Michael Foot led the anti-H Bomb marches to Aldermaston in the 1950s, just as Tony Benn led the CND marches in London, in protest against the siting of US Cruise missiles in the 1980s.

On behalf of Labour's Campaign for Socialism, I myself spoke at Scottish rallies opposing NATO's attacks on Afghanistan and Iraq in the early years of this century.

These examples, of course, do not make Labour an anti-war or an anti-nuclear weapons party. There are those within Labour's ranks who are both. Labour's 1982 programme for government even called for a world free of war, for a strengthening of the influence of the United Nations, for the dissolution of NATO and for British unilateral nuclear disarmament. That programme, however, was written during the brief "Bennite" ascendancy within the party that was swiftly brought to a brutal end.

Militarist roots

Within 18 months of its publication, the 1982 programme was being denounced by leading Labour moderates as "the longest (electoral) suicide note in history". The party has since returned to its normal militarist roots. No one should therefore be surprised by the recent article written for the *New Statesman* magazine by Labour's defence spokesperson, Jim Murphy MP, in which he outlines a blueprint for future NATO military intervention against "Islamist extremism" in poor developing countries beset by what he describes as "state weakness", "lawlessness" and "instability".



DOGS OF WAR: Labour warmongers Jim Murphy and Ed Miliband

Such states, he argues, are the "international community's" Achilles heel. They foster humanitarian abuse and terrorist activity and put UK and other citizens in the west "at risk". For the benefit of the people of these poor countries, and for the sake of our own citizens, Murphy contends that the future use of NATO force against such countries will be necessary.

Conscious of recent NATO disasters in Iraq and Afghanistan, he explains how the "lessons from our recent past" will influence future NATO aggression.

Next time "our" troops will be invited in by the "host authority"; they will be "culturally aware"; they will work alongside of local proxy armies; they will operate under the political cover provided by local multinational regional organisations.

Murphy's article could have

been penned by the still unrepentant Tony Blair who, on its tenth anniversary, not only defended the illegal invasion of Iraq but also suggested that it provided a model for future NATO assaults on Syria and Iran.

An unashamed Blairite himself, Murphy polled heavily in the parliamentary party's last Shadow Cabinet elections and enjoys the support of the Labour leadership. His is a mainstream rather than a maverick voice within Labour.

Murphy is also the latest in a long line of pro-American, pro-NATO, pro-nuclear weapons and pro-war Labour politicians.

It was a Labour Prime Minister who took the secret and fateful decision in 1947 to manufacture a British nuclear bomb. Two other Labour Prime Ministers secretly authorised the massively expensive "Chevaline" upgrading of

Polaris nuclear weapons in the 1970s. The last Labour government, of course, launched the current upgrading of Trident nuclear weapons.

Labour is arguably the most pro-NATO political party in Britain. The biographer of Clem Attlee argued that persuading the Americans to join the then newly established NATO was the post-war Labour government's "outstanding achievement" in foreign affairs.

NATO attacks

Whether in government or in opposition, Labour has consistently supported NATO attacks in Yugoslavia, Kosovo, Afghanistan and Libya.

Former Labour Defence Secretary George Robertson even served as NATO's general secretary between 1999 and the beginning of 2004.

Labour's support for US aggression and imperialism has equally been unwavering. As the official opposition, Labour provided its "full support" to the sanctions, bombing and invasion of Iraq under the first George Bush. As the government, Blair's Labour would join with the second George Bush in the illegal and murderous attacks on Afghanistan and Iraq.

There are many other examples, including a Labour government's launching of a brutal war against a nationalist uprising in Malaya, Labour involvement in the coup to overthrow a popular nationalist government in Iran and, of course, Labour support for the Falklands War.

Labour's record speaks for itself and demonstrates that in defence of the interests of national and international capitalism, Britain's dogs of war sit on both sides of the House of Commons.

by Campbell Martin

THOSE of us getting on a bit in years will recall a time when British governments strove to achieve full-employment.

The idea of creating work for the people was pursued by both Labour and Tory administrations following the Second World War.

There was sound reasoning behind the strategy: the more people in work, the more tax revenues accrued to the Treasury and the lower government-spend on welfare.

Socially, full employment meant people knew the dignity of work. Parents were able to support their families. Children saw positive role-models in the immediate family. Taxes were re-invested in local communities through the building of social housing, health-care facilities, libraries, sports pitches and leisure complexes.

With full employment, children grew up with hope and opportunity. Everyone had the prospect of securing work, earning a living and playing a positive role in society. However, the 'post-war consensus' on full-employment was shattered in 1979 with the election of a Tory Government led by Margaret Thatcher.

Expendable

In recent years a number of right-wing, revisionist writers have tried to portray Thatcher as a visionary who pulled the country up by its boot-straps, taking-on and defeating trade unions that, in Thatcher's opinion, had been hell-bent on crippling industry (apparently in some plot orchestrated in the Soviet Union).

The reality was very different. Margaret Thatcher and her Tory Government advanced the twin ideas of global capitalism and the unfettered free-market.

To Thatcher, there was no such thing as society, people were expendable: all that mattered was allowing a small Tory-voting elite to make as much money as possible.

Taxes on the rich were slashed, publicly-owned utilities - gas, electricity, telecoms, transport - were



GET UP, STAND UP: the No camp want us to sit back and keep letting Tories destroy Scottish jobs

INDEPENDENCE AND SOCIALIST POLICIES KEY TO A RENEWED SCOTLAND

sold-off to private investors looking for a quick profit, and supposedly uneconomic heavy industries were closed. The economic and social devastation we are currently enduring was started in the 1980s by the Tory Government of Margaret Thatcher.

The policies of Thatcher closed viable coal mines, steel manufacturing plants, textile factories and shipbuilding yards, with millions of workers thrown onto the scrapheap. Industrial action taken in attempts to save workplaces that often provided employment for entire communities were ruthlessly smashed by draconian anti-trade-union laws.

When greedy bosses closed factories in Britain, shipping work to low-wage, sweat-shop economies in developing countries, a compliant right-wing media portrayed this as 'good news' about British companies expanding overseas. Thirty-years of unfettered free-

market capitalism, where the profits of multi-national corporations have been put before the interests of the people, has created today's reality of soaring unemployment, increasing levels of poverty and deprivation, and a generation of young people robbed of hope and opportunity. Yet, according to the British Unionist partners of Tory, Labour and Liberal Democrat, this is as good as it gets for Scotland.

Different approach

The Better Together campaign tells us we should reject independence and, instead, we should simply allow Westminster-based Tory Governments to continue destroying Scottish industries, Scottish jobs, Scottish hopes, Scottish aspirations and Scottish lives.

With independence we can embrace a very different approach to running our own country.

With socialist policies in an independent Scotland we can once

again invest in creating jobs: a shipbuilding industry that doesn't have to rely on making warships; aircraft manufacturing could be revived, bringing with it the broad spectrum of well-paid, high skilled jobs; a free public transport system would require buses, trains, ships made in Scotland; engineering projects - railways, roads, bridges, buildings; the construction of social housing, to name just a few employment sectors that could once again thrive, providing employment for university graduates, skilled tradespeople, unskilled workers and apprentices.

In an independent, socialist Scotland we can put the interests of Scots before the profits of multi-national corporations and venture capitalists. In an independent, socialist Scotland we can once again deliver a society that provides the dignity of work for all of our citizens, and restores hope and opportunity to all of our young people.

NO EVICTIONS!

Scrap the Tory Bedroom Tax



by *Richie Venton*

APRIL Fools Day takes on new significance this year. That is the day when the Tories and Lib Dems must think millions of people are too foolish to notice their vicious wealth transfusion from the neediest to the greediest, whilst the Westminster hypocrites prattle on about us being “all in it together”, in “the Big Society”. From April, the pampered minority on incomes over £150,000 a year will enjoy a tax cut from 50p to 45p in the pound. For millionaires, that means a ‘wage’ rise of £107,000 a year!

On the same day the brutal Bedroom Tax clobbers people on the lowest incomes, many of them on £71 a week, others low-paid workers who currently qualify for partial housing benefit. They stand to lose from £12 to £22 a week on average. How the hell are people supposed to live? Of the 95,000 Scots hammered by this vicious Tory Tax, around 70 per cent have a disabled person in the household.

Homelessness

And their goal? To steal £1 billion in Housing Benefit off the poorest in society over the next two years.

Even the government’s own Department for Work and Pensions estimates that across the UK, 95,000 of the total 666,000 facing this slaughter of their meagre incomes will be simply unable to afford to pay it -

which ultimately means the threat of evictions and homelessness, a searing condemnation of 21st century capitalism. At the numerous street stalls and public meetings organised by the SSP across the country we hear absolutely heartbreaking stories of the effects on people’s lives.

The coyly named Housing Benefit (Amendment) Regulations 2012 declares that a person living on their own, or as a couple, in a social sector house, are only entitled to one bedroom - or face a 14 per cent cut to Housing Benefit for the first spare bedroom, 25 per cent if they have a third bedroom. On the surface, the idea of a single person or couple having just one bedroom might not seem controversial. But at virtually every street stall we talk to people whose partner suffers ill health, such as COPD, making sleeping together impossible. The Tories make no allowance for that.

We have spoken to several people newly bereaved, as they traipse down to the council offices in search of a smaller house, to avoid the Bedroom Tax, immediately after losing the loved one they cared for with the essential extra bedroom during prolonged illness. The heartless gangsters in Westminster make no allowance for that.

Likewise, hundreds of separated parents have described the horrible prospect come April of not being allowed a second bedroom for their children to stay over by arrange-

ment with the other parent. The Tories, ‘party of the family’, make no allowance for that.

These millionaires living in mansions have the bare-faced cheek to dictate that kids under ten have to share a bedroom, regardless of gender. And that if they are of the same gender, they are expected to share a bedroom up to the age of 16! So much for children’s rights. So much for aiding the development of independence and maturity.

‘Family values’?

The Coalition of Westminster cut-throats are past masters at the tactics of divide and rule. They demonise the sick, disabled and unemployed, so as to try and split them away from the solidarity of those in jobs. They hope to succeed this way in hammering the disabled, where disabled people needing a second bedroom are faced with the Bedroom Tax, even if they have occasional sleep-over carers - only being exempt if they literally rely on 24/7 live-in care.

The regular adverts appealing for more foster parents clash with the fact such parents face the Bedroom Tax, as the Regulations do not regard foster kids as permanent residents. So much for the Tory ‘party of the family’. The areas of multiple deprivation are precisely those which the army target to recruit young teenagers to do their dirty work in the killing fields of Afghanistan, or

god knows where next. But their parents face the Bedroom Tax on the bedroom which their sons or daughters come back to during their leave from army duties. Educate yourself to secure a future, they tell us. But students will have to stay in their parents’ home at least 2 weeks a year to dodge the Bedroom Tax; fairly manageable, you might think, but when the separate benefits attack that is Universal Credit eventually comes in, that will increase to students having to live at home a minimum of six months in the year!

One family is more than chuffed at the Bedroom Tax. David and Priscilla have three kids who have grown up and flown the nest. But this couple do not share the worry, distress and pain of not having a spare bedroom for their adult kids, or their grandchildren, to visit and stay in.

David and Priscilla live in a £1.9million townhouse in Highgate, London. With four bedrooms. At least they do during the week. At weekends and holidays they stay in their second home, one of the oldest country mansions in Kent - with eight bedrooms! So they have a total of eleven spare bedrooms!

But they don’t face the Bedroom Tax; in fact David is Lord David Freud, grandson of the famous psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud, and the Tory Welfare Minister who designed the details of the Bedroom Tax - after he ceased to be a Labour government adviser in 2009!



LET THEM KNOW: protesters put pressure on North Ayrshire Council this week PHOTO: Ian Wallace

The Bedroom Tax is a classic case of class war by the rich, hoping to divide and conquer the rest of us. They must not succeed.

Hundreds of people are pouring into public meetings on the Bedroom Tax, seeking answers, pledging to stand together, looking for how best to resist and defeat it.

One such meeting was that called by the SSP in the Vineburgh district of Irvine, in North Ayrshire. About 90 locals were at it. The meeting was red raw with anger and anxiety, with passionate speeches and applause, searching questions, and absolute determination to show solidarity to all those affected, including against the threat of evictions.

And that is a very real and present threat. Since new regulations were passed last August in Scotland, social housing landlords - councils and local housing associations - are legally bound to prevent rent arrears mounting up before taking what's called 'Pre-action requirements in rent arrears cases'. This involves repayments being negotiated before moving to notice of eviction (Proceedings for Recovery of Possession).

Eviction notices for arrears of a few hundred pounds are common already. So when people on very

low incomes lose £12 to £22 a week, it won't take long before they face the threat of eviction.

In addition, the Bedroom Tax will immediately impact on thousands of repayment arrangements made for eviction cases already dealt with at the Sheriff Courts. For example, there were 14,601 new eviction cases brought by social sector landlords in Scotland in 2010/11, plus older evictions that have been 'sisted' (stayed, or delayed). The human cost of eviction is beyond words. But they don't even make financial sense; housing charity Shelter reckon they each cost at least £6,000 - and in fact cost the taxpayer far more, as arrears are written off.

Single-ends

The Tory/Lib Dem architects of this brutal tax on the poorest are telling people to downsize to a smaller house, or get more hours of work, or take in a lodger! They want to drive the working class back to the days of the single-end, of horrendous overcrowding...whilst Lord and Lady Freud rattle round in their eleven spare bedrooms.

This 'tax' will not create a single new house, nor a single new job. Quite the opposite. There are no homes being built for rent. The legacy of the 'right to buy' ushered

in by Thatcher in the 1980s is a terrible lack of decent social sector housing, including one-bedroom houses. So we face the cruel absurdity of tenants potentially facing evictions, with the council then legally obliged to rehouse them...in a house of the same size, for lack of smaller ones! In any case, why should people have to leave the family home they've been in for years, even decades, just because their kids have grown up or their circumstances changed?

And where do these millionaire dictators propose people get extra hours of work, when their own policies of public sector cuts and mass unemployment, plus their anti-union laws, mean that employers are cutting back on hours available rather than expanding jobs? On top of all that, the Bedroom Tax is already being used by some councils and housing associations as an excuse for further cuts, due to the prospect of loss of rental income because people simply can't afford to pay - with some of them already demanding redundancies amongst staff.

The SSP is absolutely clear: we don't want this tax amended, we want it scrapped. We also see this as an added reason for an independent Scotland, so we can elect a government with the powers and political

commitment to abolish it. But people can't wait until 2014, or the subsequent 2016 elections. We need action here and now.

At SSP street stalls and public meetings we have appealed for volunteers to mount legal challenges to the multitude of outrageous anomalies and injustices in the Bedroom Tax. We have helped to build networks of people prepared to defend anyone facing future evictions, in the ways many of us did in the anti-Poll Tax struggle, to block the use of Sheriff Officers to throw people on the streets.

And we have organised protests at council meetings, to demand that they do two things that are well within their powers: declare there will be no evictions arising from Bedroom Tax arrears, and that they imitate the actions of Knowsley Council on Merseyside, which is 're-designating' all its houses, re-defining what is a bedroom, so as to dodge the Bedroom Tax.

Mount pressure

Likewise, we need to mount pressure on the Scottish Government and individual MSPs to demand a 'No Evictions' pledge, which would lift a huge fear from thousands of people, and support for the demand to amend Section 16 of the Scotland Housing Act so that Bedroom Tax arrears will not lead to evictions.

The government should also fund councils to ameliorate the impact through Discretionary Housing Payments, and guide councils and housing associations on a definition of 'bedroom' that avoids this iniquitous tax. Thousands of people need immediate action from councils, housing association bosses and the Scottish Government. Solidarity and unity in the community is critical to resisting this appalling attack.

The SSP is at the heart of this resistance, whilst also fighting for longer-term, permanent solutions, including the building of decent, affordable housing for all needs, which in itself would generate jobs, and for taxation of the rich to fund jobs and increased benefits for those unable to work. Unite against evictions! Unite to axe the Bedroom Tax!

Why Scottish CND backs Yes camp

by Brian Quail

DO not adjust your TV sets. We are now in the Twilight Zone. A sort of "Alice through the Looking Glass" world, where words mean their opposite. Thus, in this Referendum, "No" means "Yes". It means yes to the status quo, to the Westminster consensus on wholesale privatisation, massive cuts, and the systematic dismantling of the Welfare State.

It means yes to the campaign against the poor and the unemployed (aka as "the something for nothing scroungers"). It means support for the whole neo-liberal agenda that dominates Westminster.

It means yes to more foreign wars. Above all, No means yes to Trident. All the Unionist parties support this, the sacrosanct totem of the British state.

They all acquiesce to the "existing and actual" reality of Trident on patrol, in full alert 24/7, ready to bring the Sun to Earth and murder untold thousands.

On the other hand, Yes means no to all of the above. Yes gives us the chance to build an alternative, based on different values and priorities.

There can be no greater gulf in religion, politics, or ideology than the chasm that separates those who say yes to the unimaginable human carnage Trident promises, and those who scream a silent - or not so silent - no!

Apart from these basic considerations, what really swung SCND's conference to the Yes campaign was the irrefutable logic of John Ainslie's authoritative report, "Trident - Nowhere to Go". Using MoD data and governmental publications, this

demonstrates that there is nowhere else in the UK that Trident can operate from, other than the Coulport/Faslane complex. No group supporting independence wants a Scottish retention of Trident (anyone for an "independent Scottish nuclear deterrent"?). Therefore, an independent Scotland means a nuclear-free UK. CND has achieved its aim. We've won.

The redoubtable Bruce Kent summarised it succinctly on a recent visit to Scotland: "I am an Englishman, but I support Scottish independence, because it is the best way to get rid of Trident."

It goes without saying that this decision does not imply support for the SNP (especially now that it has adopted a pro-NATO position), or any other party. SCND have always been, and we will remain, politically

unaligned. Last December saw the Radical Independence Conference in the Radisson Blu hotel in Glasgow, attended by 900 people from all walks of life.

Most of these were young, and many came from an ethnic background. For most, it was their first involvement in a political event.

There was a fantastic buzz about the occasion. SCND had a stall there, which was often thronged, and we recruited several new members.

Had we not made the decision to support the Yes campaign, we could not have been there. This would indicate that our decision was the right one.

All we have to do now, is to inform others of the fact that a nuclear-free, independent Scotland means a nuclear-free UK, and convince them to follow this vision.

LABOUR'S PRO-INDY WING IS ON THE RISE

Labour For Independence (LFI) held their AGM recently. LFI chair **Alex Bell** outlines their ideas

LABOUR For Independence started its life as a Facebook page last spring with two men and a keyboard. It went from there to its first conference in November, had its first AGM last week and is already seen as a big part of the Yes campaign with over 2000 supporters, and rising daily.

It was born out of a frustration with the party's head in the sand attitude to Devo Max, its refusal to even consider constitutional change and to the steady gallop to the right at Westminster.

It's about more than independence, it's about a fundamental change in the direction of Scottish Labour. We're fighting inside the party for a return to real labour values. Remember, it was Labour, not the SNP, who

brought in free bus passes for OAPs (Dewar) and no tuition fees (McLeish). None of them were ever regarded as being on the left but now we have even those Labour fundamentals discarded by the likes of Lamont, Curran and Murphy. Simply opposing everything the SNP do is a case of tactics without strategy. It is not good for Scotland and as election and polls continue to show, it's not good for the party either.

LFI sees independence as a wonderful opportunity. It releases Scottish Labour from the handcuffs of the home counties focus groups that see Miliband/New Labour/Progress pander to estate agents and Rolls Royce dealers in Essex.

It gets rid of the need to attract the greed-is-good Thatcherite-mentality of middle England's electorate and refocuses us on what's good for working people in Scotland.

We want to take the energy com-

panies back into public ownership, repeal Thatcher's anti-trade union legislation, end compulsory competitive tendering, starting with care work. We want a living wage and a commitment to universal benefits. New Labour in Westminster will never do any of that.

And the only way we'll EVER get rid of Trident is by voting Yes. We don't believe in staying in an alliance based on WMDs either. We're firmly in the No to Nato camp.

The perceived threat to Scotland is Muslim terrorism? Sure, you'll stop a suicide bomber wearing a Semtex waistcoat in Sauchiehall Street by launching a Trident missile at them but I think there's a rather safer, and far cheaper way. Stop invading Muslim countries, stop stealing their oil and show a consistency for human rights by condemning Israel's continued aggression, it's illegal blockade of Gaza and by recognising the rights

of the Palestinians to self-determination. Scotland's integrity on the international stage will speak far louder than our possession of WMDs.

These are the reasons why the Scottish left can unite behind independence. The potential Scotland has to rid itself of the market economy greed-is-good economics and make a fair and just country. I shouldnae laugh but even the SWP have seen in sense in socialism in one country!

There are those who say "what about working class unity?" Well, how does Scots grannies losing their bus pass help OAPs in England? Or keeping Thatcher's anti TU laws help in Liverpool? We're not abandoning them, we're showing them a better way. The choice for Scottish Labour is clear. Say No and stay with Westminster and New Labour. Or. Say Yes to a positive future with the people Scotland and be the Labour Party you want to be.

by Ralph Blake

THE most surprising thing about UK's credit downgrade is that it took so long, even by credit ratings agencies standards, for Moody's to move the UK to AA. We had forecast the slump the Coalition was going to create in June 2010. Given that France, with similar levels of debt but a stronger economy, was downgraded over one year ago, why did it take so long to downgrade the UK? Part of the reason is that credit agencies share some of the political economic theory of Osborne and all - austerity will somehow stimulate growth and create higher tax revenues, reducing the deficit and creating jobs.

The opposite of this has of course happened. UK public debt has grown to £1265billion at the end of February 2013. The figures the government use as a headline number are about £120billion lower as they exclude the debt issued for the bailouts of the financial system - the root cause of the spiral of deficit and debt that we are in. Half of this £120billion is unrecoverable and 20 per cent of the remainder used to bailout RBS and Lloyds has been written off by the government.

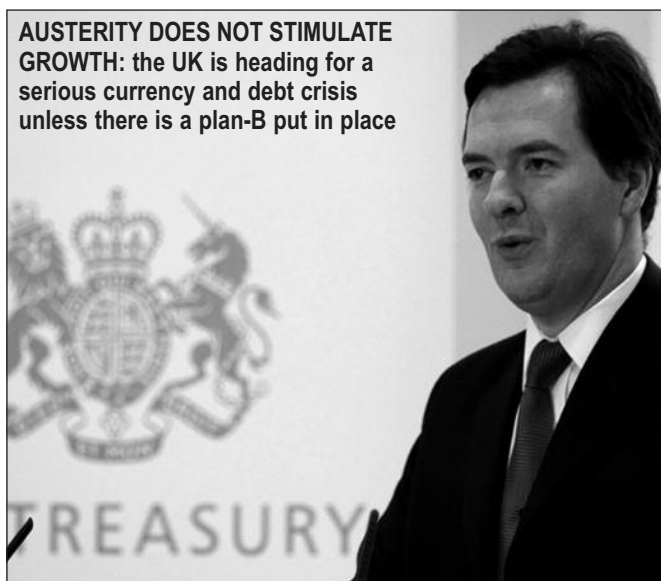
Worst recovery

Our total debt stands at 88 per cent of real GDP (the figures used to calculate official growth numbers) or 82 per cent of notional GDP which only the UK government uses and takes no account of inflation. Using this notional GDP the economy would have grown 7.6 per cent since the financial crisis instead of shrinking 3.2 per cent. As well as experiencing the worst recession since the 1930s, we have witnessed the worst recovery from a recession since the 19th century.

In other words we are in a slump. The financial markets have of course recognised this, well before the ratings agencies. UK government borrowing costs have risen at one point by 50 per cent since last August last year, while at the same time Sterling has weakened against a basket of major currencies by 8 per cent. The deficit, which has to be funded by issuing new debt, has not been brought

What does the UK's new AA credit rating mean?

AUSTERITY DOES NOT STIMULATE GROWTH: the UK is heading for a serious currency and debt crisis unless there is a plan-B put in place



under control as Osborne promised. It looks for the financial year 2012/13 to at least going to match the previous year's figure of £121billion. Since the financial crisis we will have piled on £760billion of debt at an average of £152billion per year.

Prior to the financial crisis the annual deficit was running at £30billion a year. This puts paid to the lie that the deficit/debt is the fault of superfluous reckless spending on services. It's clearly directly linked (excluding the average £30billion per year deficit prior to the crisis) to: the bailout of the financial system (£120billion); subsidies to stop the 2008/09 recession turning into a depression (£45billion); the fall in tax revenues from individuals and companies because of the recession; and the increase in welfare sending to support the 3.5million people who have been made redundant since the financial crisis (£445billion).

So although services are being cut, the deficit remains high because of the number of people who have to be supported from being made redundant since the crisis. Those who have found fresh work are either now working part-time or on much lower wages or notionally "self-employed".

The climate of austerity is not helping any recovery but we must recognise that the UK economy was based on a service industry fuelled by credit, private housing and financial services. This financial bubble economy has burst globally and we would have lagged without austerity other major mature economies. Who then is buying all this debt? The simple answer is that we ourselves are buying it through a giant Ponzi scheme.

We have all heard of the Bank of England's (BOE) Quantitative Easing (QE). But what is QE? Essentially, the BOE prints money that it technically borrows from itself at the

base rate 0.5 per cent per year. The government sells fresh debt each month to cover the month's deficit between spending and tax revenues. The debt is sold to intermediaries such as pension and hedge funds.

These funds then sell it to the BOE who pay for it using the money they have printed. We the taxpayer pays the interest to BOE and repays the debt in full when it expires. So far the BOE has bought an incredible £375billion worth of UK government debt through this QE method, about 60 per cent of the debt the government has issued over the last four years. Without QE our borrowing costs would be much higher. The dilemma for the government is that QE is finished and with a weak pound and downgrade, the demand from foreign investors for UK government debt will fall - 36 per cent of our total debt is held overseas. This will push up the cost of borrowing for the UK.

More austerity

This is why there is a clamour within Downing Street and the BOE for more QE to take up the shortfall in demand for our debt. But there is a limit to the size of QE because of the losses that could be incurred by BOE, and ultimately us, if interest rates were to rise and bond prices fall.

We are now going into a phase of a slump, weak pound with imported inflation and a recognition that the structural weakness of the UK economy plus austerity means UK plc is not a very attractive place for investors? This will lead to higher borrowing costs which means the coalition will drive through more austerity to try and meet their austerity targets but that as we know just prolongs and deepens the slump and the deficit. Unless there is a plan-B put in place that uses revenue from tax avoidance, the banks, taxes on the rich and wealthy and nationalised North Sea Oil revenues to finance public projects, then the UK is heading for a serious currency and debt crisis.

• *Ralph Blake is a financial analyst and a former head of strategy and research in investment banking*



NO JOKE: former stand-up comedian Beppe Grillo's protest movement picked up a quarter of votes in Italy's lower chamber

Italy confronts fresh crisis

by Bill Bonnar

ITALY has been plunged into a fresh political crisis following the recent general election. No party won a clear majority; this against a background of severe economic crisis with an economy teetering on the edge.

The result was a stalemate. The Centre Left Bloc led by Pier Luigi Bersani won 30 per cent in the Lower Chamber and 32 per cent in the Senate. The Centre Right Bloc led by Silvio Berlusconi won 29 per cent and 31 per cent respectively. Of course, we should be careful in the use of right and left to describe these two camps.

While the Centre Left contains some socialist elements and the Centre Right includes some deeply reactionary elements; in practice there would be little difference whichever group was in power.

Both work to the same agenda - they embrace broadly similar policies and work to the same objectives. Both are committed to an austerity programme in which the

working class pay for the crisis of Italy's capitalist class. The claim to difference is who can 'manage' the crisis better.

Presented with this choice, it is little wonder that significant sections of the electorate voted for a protest movement around the former stand-up comedian Beppe Grillo. His movement picked up a quarter of the votes in the Lower Chamber. Bereft of policies, their campaign consisted on a generalised rant against the two main blocs and against established politics generally - something which clearly hit a nerve.

The background to this election is the worst economic crisis since the great crash of the 1930s. Unemployment stands officially at 11 per cent although most commentators believe this represents a significant underestimate.

More than 100,000 small firms went bankrupt last year in an economy where small businesses play a larger role than in comparable European countries. Emigration has reached levels not seen since the time of Mussolini, while

the country's debt crisis has already provoked one major bailout.

Politically, the country is still suffering from the malign impact of Silvio Berlusconi, who ran the country through a combination of corruption, patronage and media manipulation. This should have provided rich territory for a left alternative but in fact has engendered a degree of hopelessness and cynicism - reflected, in part, in the eight-million votes for Beppe Grillo.

The country is now locked into a political crisis, with no government able to form a working majority, which in turn is fuelling a deepening economic crisis.

As with Greece, the 'centre' parties are finding it increasingly difficult to hold the centre ground. Wedded to a programme of austerity which is clearly not working and increasingly rejected by the Italian people, they are limping towards another bailout with crippling conditions attached.

Already, elements of the Centre Right, such as the neo-fascist Northern League, are talking

about more authoritarian solutions, cheered on by a media still in the pocket of Berlusconi. For them, the crisis has been caused by immigrants, European bureaucrats and feckless scroungers.

The need for an effective left alternative is now crucial. This is a country with a strong recent left tradition. As late as the 1970s, it boasted a mass communist party polling upwards of 30 per cent of the vote.

Today, the left is small and fragmented, yet the space is there for advances.

A large number of those voting for Bersani's Centre Left Bloc are from this constituency, and voted for the Centre Left largely to try and stop the Centre Right winning. Likewise, many of those voting for Grillo's 'anti-politics' group will be from the left.

What is needed is for that constituency to forge a new left movement and a different vision for Italy. Failure to do so could lead to further years of draconian austerity and the very possible return of fascism.

HUGO CHÁVEZ DEATH SPARKS WAVE OF SOLIDARITY ACROSS LATIN AMERICA

News of the death from cancer aged 58 of Venezuelan President **Hugo Chávez** broke as the *Voice* went to press. In our next issue we will carry a detailed look at how his death will impact on Venezuela and the wider world. Here, **Ken Ferguson** takes a look at President Chávez and his legacy

PRESIDENT Hugo Chávez, who led Venezuela for 14 years and only last year handsomely won a fresh term in office, was a figure of significance not just in Latin America but across the world. In a world in which neo-liberal capitalism bestrode the globe apparently unchallenged, proclaiming the “end of history”, Chávez boldly proclaimed his project to be the building of 21st century socialism.

The impact of this beacon of hope was summed up in the reaction of filmmaker Oliver Stone, who produced a film about Chávez. Stone tweeted:

“I mourn a great hero to the majority of his people and those who struggle throughout the world... Hated by the entrenched classes, Hugo Chávez will live forever in history. My friend, rest finally in a peace long earned.”

At home, the Chávez government shifted large scale resources from the wealthy pro-US elite to those facing grinding poverty and struggling to access basic services.

With the aid of Cuban-trained doctors, health care was transformed while a range of key industries including cement, oil and electricity were taken into public ownership.

Venezuela is a major oil producer and under Chávez, oil was made available at favourable rates to neighbours struggling to build more just, human-centred societies.

Developing from an alliance between Venezuela and Cuba, the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (Spanish: Alianza Bolivariana para los Pueblos de Nuestra América, or ALBA) is an international cooperation organisation based on the idea of the social, political and economic integration of the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean.

It is associated with socialist and social democratic governments and is an attempt at regional economic integration based on

a vision of social welfare, battling and mutual

economic aid. Member nations are Antigua and Barbuda, Bolivia, Cuba, Dominica, Ecuador, Nicaragua, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines and Venezuela. At the February 2012 summit, Suriname and Saint Lucia were admitted to ALBA as guest countries.

ALBA nations are in the process of introducing a new regional currency, the SUCRE which it is planned will replace the US dollar in their trade with each other.

Alongside developments such the launch of Telesur TV, which breaks the pro-capitalist monopoly of Fox News, Murdoch and CNN, ALBA has been a major development in the liberation of the region from its former status as that of a US colonial backyard.

That this development was under way in the countries of the region is beyond doubt, and is a key reason why capitalist hopes that it will disappear with Chávez’s death are likely to be dashed.

However, there is equally no doubt that the role of Venezuela led by Chávez played a key role in buttressing that process, and this was reflected in the reaction of his fellow Latin American leaders to his death.

Bolivian President Evo Morales, one of Chávez’s closest allies, declared in a televised speech: “Chávez is more alive than ever. He will continue to be an inspiration for all peoples who fight for their liberation. Chávez will always be present in all the regions of the world and all social sectors. Hugo Chávez will always be with us, accompanying us.”

In Cuba, President Raul Castro’s government declared two days of national mourning and ordered the flag to fly at half-mast.

“It is with deep and excruciating sorrow that our people and the revolutionary government have learned of President Hugo Rafael Chávez Frías’s death,” it said in a statement read on the nightly state TV newscast.

“The Cuban people view him as one of their most outstanding sons.”

Argentine President Cristina Fernandez, another Chávez ally, declared three days of mourning nationwide. In Nicaragua, Rosario Murillo, the wife and spokeswoman of President Daniel Ortega, said Chávez is “one of the dead who never die”.

“We are all Chávez,” she added.



HUGO CHÁVEZ:
when his death was announced, supporters gathered at Plaza Bolívar, the main square in the Venezuelan capital Caracas, and started chanting: “Chávez vive, la lucha sigue” - “Chávez lives, the battle continues...”

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

by Sandra Webster

SPRING is in the air again, shaking off the last of the old year. One of the days I always enjoy participating in is International Women's Day (IWD) on 8 March. Over the years, I have marched, attended workshops and spent time with some amazing women. Women, given their space, fill it with vibrancy and love, and affect the world around them.

That is why we need to be given that, not just as an optional extra to tick off a few boxes about equality, but as a way to change cultures and society.

In 2013, the need for IWD is even more important than ever. In the UK, the brunt of the cuts are being felt by women.

More and more, the lack of essential frontline services mean women are being left to cope and manage with an impact on our own health.

With cuts to benefits and the squeeze on wage packets, we have already returned to the bad old days when we make sure the other members of our families are fed before we ourselves eat.

Women's organisations continue to highlight violence against women. Women's Aid have seen



SISTER SWEDGE: women bear the brunt of the ConDem cuts

the number of referrals to them increase, and many women report that they're frightened of the effect benefit cuts will have on them.

The Universal Credit will mean that only one member of the household will receive all the income, meaning some women and children will be dependent on an abusive, controlling partner.

We might look at the horrendous cases being reported of violence against women in the international

press and think it couldn't happen here, but in reality it can.

The theme of IWD 2013 is 'A promise is a promise: Time to end violence against women'. What does violence mean? As well as rape and sexual offences, it is attitudinal - very real barriers that prevent women taking their rightful place with men in society.

I look forward to the Independence Referendum in 2014. One of the reasons I want independence is

to create a fairer, kinder society. It will be an opportunity for us to look at the inequalities that exist, and act on them to make a difference.

Positive discrimination does not mean showing favour to a disadvantaged group but recognising that due to existing inequalities, women, along with other groups, need a hand up just to be on the same level as everyone else.

Why are there so few women in high positions in the judiciary, government - in fact, in every sphere of public life? Why are women not as confident as men in putting themselves as forward as men? It is a question that needs to be addressed in the personal and body politic.

It has been a grim time for the Liberal Democrats, with so many women coming forward to report abuse of power, but every political party of all shades has to recognise, and so ensure, that women are listened too.

We need to recognise how much women have to offer at all levels of society. Men can help make our roles easier and fight for our rights, not after independence but now.

To all my sisters, from me and all at the *Voice*, keep doing what you do so well to support those who need us most. Looking forward to working with you in the year ahead.



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