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Opportunity Knocks: Unlocking the Door to English Greenlandic Bilingualism

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Abstract: *Developing a decolonized Greenlandic identity entails challenging colonial categories and fostering complex, inclusive national identities. While Greenlandic is not in immediate danger of extinction, its marginalization in professional, technical, and high-level administrative, or educational contexts poses a long-term threat to its status as a fully functional, modern language. Greenlandic is considered essential to Greenland's identity and independence movement, while continued reliance on Danish is often perceived as a remnant of colonial history. Danish-speaking colonial connotations are likely to fade if Greenlanders adopt culturally responsive bilingual education that protects cultural heritage while also preparing youth for the financial opportunities that come with global English. Embracing linguistic hybridity through a gradual shift to English as a second language and reorienting Greenland's relations toward the U.S. could be the best approach to achieving national independence. This shift could also make it easier to incorporate elements of modernization in Greenland's 21st century identity and facilitate the inclusion of Danish-speaking Greenlanders in the process. As noted by Gad (2009), Greenland's agency in choosing to move beyond essentialist narratives requires dialogue across cultures to preserve its language without sacrificing self-determination or access to power.*

INTRODUCTION

President Trump's serious geostrategic concern about the potential Chinese and Russian exploitation of vulnerabilities in Arctic security spurs interest in how an increase in the local

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need for English could affect Greenland. Greenland already grapples with the language rights of its Indigenous Greenlandic Inuit majority within the Kingdom of Denmark**.** Of the less than 100,0000 Inuit people speaking Inuit languages, about half speak Greenlandic (Møller, 2021). Set against English and Danish as powerful societal languages that symbolize status, Greenlandic is struggling to survive. In this context, English is often seen as an undesirable consequence of globalization and an inevitable culprit of the potential erasure of the Greenlandic language and identity.

However, promoting English bilingualism is bound to add complexity to the post-colonial dichotomies experienced by Greenlanders and diminish their negative consequences (Björklund, 2011). Emphasizing English language learning can also challenge simplistic identity politics discourses and diffuse tensions between maintaining traditional identity and integrating modernization. According to Gad (2009), Greenland's ethno-nationalist revival has supported legal and political advancements but has limited economic and educational self-sufficiency. At a time when the United States is arguing for a more robust U.S. presence on the island to field interoperable military capabilities at scale around the world, Greenlanders may want to reconsider the benefits of English as a second language over Danish.

Even though the law protects the rights of both Greenlandic and Danish-speaking peoples to use their respective languages in government and legal settings, social disparities exist in Greenland because a significant portion of the administrative and political elite use Danish. Greenland's Home Rule government is responsible for most domestic affairs, yet Danish remains integral to Greenland's judiciary and public administration (Heinrich, n.d.). Also contributing to the social divide is a shortage of Greenlandic-speaking professionals, especially in major towns, which maintains a high reliance on Danish and translators. Hence, elevating

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Greenlandic as a tool to dismantle colonial legacies, particularly in education, has been at the heart of Greenlanders' efforts toward independence from Denmark.

Jacobsen (2015) suggests that Greenlandic governments have exploited a Greenlandic identity narrative based on Inuit traditions and language as a distinct and hereditary culture to leverage independence from Denmark. However, contemporary attempts to distinguish Greenlandic from Danish immigrants and foreign nationals as fundamentally different cultures dismiss important elements of colonialism that cannot be excluded from Greenlandic identity. Therefore, a monolithic ethnic depiction that treats most Greenlanders as a single block reduces complex subgroups into a uniform stereotype, ignoring significant differences within the population. Furthermore, Gad (2009) notes that most Greenlanders embrace ideas linked to Danish influence regarding language and social inclusion, democratic ideals, welfare benefits, and a need for modernization, which conflict with traditional and nationalist narratives.

As a consequence of Greenland's colonial history, the Danish language and influence continue to dominate over education and governance. Often contrasted with Danish influence as Other, Greenland's identity is portrayed through traditional Inuit culture, yet Björklund (2011) affirms that the power dynamics of language policies have privileged Danish and Greenlandic bilingualism. Structural inequalities marginalize monolingual Greenlandic speakers economically and socially, while bilingual Greenlanders benefit from greater opportunities. Hence, linguistic inequalities from post-colonial power dynamics often entail the exclusion of monolingual Greenlandic speakers from information and power, while bilinguals occupy elite positions.

Since the introduction of Home Rule, both the Greenlandic and Danish languages are taught in schools and can be used in all public contexts (Heinrich, n.d.). The school law of 1979 also

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helps protect Greenlandic as the language of instruction beginning in the first grade. In addition, it states that Danish language instruction begins in the fourth grade and English in the seventh grade. Furthermore, the Home Rule actively supports Greenlandic literature, art, and film. Relatedly, the Greenland Language Council, known as the Oqaasiliortut, monitors the development of the Greenlandic language and approves new terminology. To provide a clear framework for linguistic integration in Greenland, the language policy act of 2010 proposes removing existing language barriers and promoting language acquisition to strengthen Greenlandic and its development as a native and second language (Statsministeriet, n.d.).

The Language Threat in Greenland

Greenlandic belongs to the Eskimo-Aleut (Eskaleut) language family, which is also spoken in Alaska, Canada, and Siberia. It is an umbrella term that includes all the dialects of the Inuit language spoken across the island. The population of Greenland (Kalaallit Nunaat) is widely dispersed, but because West Greenland is the most densely populated area, Kalaallisut, literally, "in the way of the Greenlander," is the standard language of most Inuit communities on the island. Other spoken dialects include East Greenlandic and Inuktun, or Avanersuarmiutut (Polar, or Northern Greenlandic). According to a 2026 United Nations report, Greenlandic is used by roughly 70% of the population in Greenland. Despite being spoken by 85–90% of the population (roughly 50,000–57,000 people), UNESCO has classified Greenlandic as a vulnerable language, and certain Greenlandic dialects as facing endangerment. The significant social and cultural changes that Greenlandic communities have undergone to transition to a more modern labor society have been associated with a deterioration in the mental health of young people given that today's Indigenous youth often lack the cultural connection to shared

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identity, engagement, and purpose that served as a protective factor for older generations (Rubin et al., 2024; Wexler et al., 2014). Though mastered by those populations who use it as a daily means of expression, if Greenlandic is absent from the educational system, media, publishing, and public domain in general, it risks joining the thousands of languages that disappear each year. Greenlandic predominates in primary education and daily life and, since 2009, has been declared the sole official language. Still, no language test is required to reside in Greenland, and higher education and many administrative systems currently rely on Danish to a significant degree. Demant-Poort and Elstad (2023) find that a shortage of educational materials and qualified teachers fluent in Greenlandic significantly hampers its use in higher education. Since Danish is the main language of instruction in higher education, Greenlandic-speaking students with low Danish language proficiency may find themselves at a disadvantage upon entering higher school and university in either Greenland or Denmark.

The Language Policy Act protects the right of businesses and organizations to create their own language policy, such that public authorities and private companies with at least ten employees are free to use languages other than Greenlandic (Faingold, 2023). This facilitates conditions for Greenlandic to give way to Danish and English in the workplace, potentially aggravating its exclusion in high-stakes spaces. Nonetheless, the digital presence of the Greenlandic language may be growing thanks to increased youth social media use, even though few specialized software and online tools exist in Greenlandic, and comprehensive online Greenlandic dictionaries and specialized software remain scarce. Too often, rather than becoming bilingual, minority language speakers opt to switch completely to the societal language (Crystal, 2000). Greenlanders' general access to the Internet, where English is the dominant language, greatly improved after the sea cable was laid in 2008. Greenlandic children,

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many of whom use YouTube and gaming apps, are already communicating with their Greenlandic peers in pidgin-style English. Hence, in an effort to decrease language inequality and avert language death while adequately preparing students for global competition in Greenland, Faingold (2023) supports targeted investments in education to foster literacy in Greenlandic, Danish, and English.

Culturally response bilingual education

Cultural competence in education refers to educators' ability to understand, respect, and respond to the diverse cultural backgrounds and identities of the students they serve (Eden et al., 2024). It calls educators to recognize, understand, appreciate, and integrate the cultural diversity present in educational and community settings and create learning environments where students feel valued, respected, and empowered to succeed regardless of their cultural heritage or background (Horvat et al., 2014). Actively integrating these principles into institutional policies, curriculum development, and teaching practices fosters the ongoing process of building relationships, respecting varied cultural backgrounds, and improving student engagement to close equity gaps. Given these points, Greenlandic policy-makers who sidestep English learning because they believe it comes at the cost of cultural knowledge may regulate teacher training programs in ways that shortchange Greenlanders.

Culturally Responsive Education aims to help students thrive in the evolving place-based needs and opportunities within their communities. It attempts to connect Indigenous students' community, culture, local knowledge, and practical skills with academics to promote students' self-efficacy (Fons, 2025). Notwithstanding the benefits of culturally responsive education, instructional design for 21st century Greenlandic youth should also help learners build

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transferable communication skills that enhance their employment potential and the well-being of their communities. Safeguarding the intangible Greenlandic cultural heritage is not mutually exclusive with broadening students' worldview in ways that help them compete on a global level. A reductionist view of the subtle interplay between big and small languages labels big languages as killers and smaller languages as victims. In a world where approximately half of the world's population is bilingual, and 20% is multilingual (Crystal, 2000), the view that the English language is a tool for globalization that threatens the Greenlandic language and identity may be an oversimplification of the possibilities available to students Pituffik, or Thule Air Base, plays a role in advancing mutual benefits for the Greenlandic and American peoples in many areas. It also indicates that Greenlandic-English bilingualism may be key to connections involving strategic employment opportunities. After all, societal bilingualism often occurs when sustained contact between two or more language groups with different levels of numerical, economic, and political power takes place (Grosjean, 1982). Hence, responsive, equitable teaching strategies are not consistent with anti-American bias in education - a bias that could preclude students of low socioeconomic backgrounds from accessing important real-world opportunities at home. Fons (2025) maintains that Culturally Responsive Education Outside the Classroom (CREOtC) "affects learning and motivation among Indigenous students, as authenticity and real-world connections to their own culture provide students with a sense of belonging to the land and community as well as to school" (p.22). To be sure, a worldview that values protecting and promoting the diversity of Indigenous cultural expressions can coexist with quality English instruction for accessing personal growth opportunities.

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A Post-Post-Colonial Greenlandic Identity

Adequately preparing Greenlandic students for sustained and improved cooperation with the United States may be key to leveraging ethnic bias at home. At present, Danish may present a bulwark against the important benefits that bilingual students of Greenlandic and English could reap, but geography may change that. According to Davis (2026), the fully operational Golden Dome missile-defense project is designed to defend against nuclear intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) and submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs), as well as long-range cruise missile threats, hypersonic weapons, and fractional orbital bombardment systems from Russia, China, and North Korea. The estimated $175 billion to $3.6 trillion U.S. investment in Greenland over the next two decades represents a significant rise in competitive employment opportunities and long-term cultural exchange (Schaefer, 2026).

Despite Greenlanders' resistance to President Trump's interest in Greenland, the United States has a long history of close cooperation with the Danish and Greenlandic governments based on deep economic ties, strong defense partnership, and shared respect for democratic values, human rights, and the rule of law (U.S. Embassy Copenhagen, 2020). The political will and capacity for autonomous decision-making beyond colonial constraints will determine whether Greenlanders take practical steps in language policy and international relations to move past colonial dependencies and adopt English as their second language. Gad (2009) asserts that such a move would align with strategies used by other post-colonial nations to successfully navigate globalization by reducing their colonial language of dominance. If Greenlanders center their post-post-colonial identity development on modernization rather than on cultural identity preservation, a gradual shift toward English could ease their movement to independence with integration into global markets.

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CONCLUSION

Language can serve as a means of seizing and maintaining power. People in positions of authority will try to protect their status by using their mastery of the societal language as a barrier to impede others from social advancement. Because over 70% of people from Denmark speak English as a second language, prioritizing English language learning could help many Greenlanders mitigate issues of ethnic bias. As a means of forging a strong Greenlandic national identity, a gradual shift towards English as a second language could help reduce Danish influence. In short, strategically prioritizing English in education could abate colonial connotations, facilitate the inclusion of Greenlandic-English bilingual speakers in positions of power, and improve Greenland's prospects for independence (Gad, 2009).

Denmark, with its relatively small military, cannot realistically defend the vast Arctic territory against real existential threats. Hence, President Trump's 2025 U.S. National Security Strategy made clear its intent to reassert American preeminence in the Western Hemisphere in the face of a threatening encroachment by China and Russia into either Greenland or Latin America. Within the projected U.S. sphere of influence, linguistic hybridity offers Greenlanders an opportunity to spur inclusion and reduce social stratification. Embracing Greenlandic-English bilingualism as a post-post-colonial Greenlandic identity is a real consideration that today's Greenlanders must seriously weigh for themselves.

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Community Arts in our Time of Crises

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Abstract: *This article reflects on multiple crises being negotiated by community arts practitioners in the contemporary moment. Based on reflections on/about the International Community Arts Festival (ICAF) that took place in Rotterdam in March 2026, as well as some of the productions staged under its umbrella, the article contextualises the emergence of the festival as a legacy of Rotterdam's term as European City of Culture. Acknowledging the comparatively recent arrival of the term 'community arts' to the Netherlands, the paper also considers how such arts practices simultaneously function as a mode of societal critique and expressive self-organisation and as a policy projection tied to social programmes that are tasked with delivering impact in 'disadvantaged' communities. Discussions at ICAF 2026 highlighted community arts' possible 'crisis of confidence' in the face of funders' managerialist expectations and the rise of the far right globally. The former has led to the increasing normalisation of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and Logic Models in determining purpose and value in the field, while the latter relates to some key tensions inherent to doing participatory, community-led arts work in these populist times. Conversely, this paper also discusses how community arts can be a powerful aesthetic and political vehicle for critically interrogating profound societal questions such as the implications of the climate crisis; inequalities shaping assumptions about the 'migration crisis'; and the crisis of legitimacy impacting on the state and professional agencies in different contexts.*

Keywords: *community arts; International Community Arts Festival; crisis; KPIs, participatory values.*

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What do we mean by community arts, who gets to use the term to describe their artistic practice and under what circumstances does such practice become possible and knowable? Because these are recurring and unresolved questions, they might also appear as redundant, inciting complaints that we have been here before too many times, and that the associated debate gets us nowhere. However, I am convinced that they remain essential and generative questions that allow for recognition of the dynamism, diversity and context specificness that characterises 'community arts', while also urging caution about some of the overly generalising claims that are made about such art's commitments to community participation, cultural democracy, and collective creative processes (see also Garrido Castellano, 2023; Kester, 2004; Matarasso, 2018; Meade and Shaw, 2021; Shaw and Meade, 2013: van Erven, 2013; Whelan and Ryan, 2016). In March 2026 I attended the International Community Arts Festival (ICAF) in Rotterdam. ICAF's eclectic programme incorporates active processes of co-creation; community visits; street performances; workshops where participants make music or move together; discussions of lessons learned from practice, policy and political engagements; and high-concept staged productions. As might be expected from such a diverse line-up, one that attracts participants from across the globe, there is no single or unified message, medium or doctrine that can be taken as representative of the Festival itself. I made choices reflecting my interests and enthusiasms about the workshops I attended and I cannot pretend to have a full overview of everything that fell under its banner. Therefore, this paper is not a review of ICAF 2026: instead, it offers some reflections on the diverse crises being navigated by contemporary community arts based on thinking with/about ideas and experiences I encountered in Rotterdam.

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Contexts, concepts and changing expectations– a crisis of confidence?

As Gerry Mooney (2004) has recorded, with reference to the debate in Glasgow, the designation of cities as 'European Capitals of Culture' has long provoked disputes about the resulting costs and legacies for local people, about whose and what versions of culture prevail, and regarding the societal expectations that can or should be attached to the arts. Given the prevalence of such controversies across the EU, it is notable that ICAF first came into being in 2001 when its home city of Rotterdam was granted City of Culture status. As is evident from its website, it also seeks to be *more* than a festival, identifying as a 'multi-trajectory, international program. We are at once **a digital platform, a global Hub network**, and, every three years, **an international festival**' (ICAF, 2026:n.p. original emphasis).

Although the concept and practice of 'community arts' have been circulating in the UK and Ireland since the 1970s (Kelly, 1984; Fitzgerald, 2004) - where earlier incarnations were often but not exclusively linked to counter-cultural politics or to social and community-based movements for change - the expression itself did not have the same profile or purchase in the Netherlands. Dutch community theatre practitioner and theorist, Eugene van Erven (2015:407), a former artistic director of ICAF, observes that 'the term "community arts" entered the Netherlands around the turn of the new millennium', when an Arts Council representative encountered it 'on a trip to England and introduced it to our country in conjunction with the equally problematic term "social inclusion" and without being aware of its diminishing status in Britain'. These comments evoke significant tensions within and around community arts internationally; how it simultaneously functions as a mode of societal critique and expressive self-organisation *and* as a policy projection that is tied to social programmes that are, in turn,

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tasked with delivering impact in 'areas of disadvantage' or among peoples classed as 'excluded'. For community members, there are significant ontological differences between self-constituting as active cultural/democratic subjects and being constituted as objects of policy intervention. Furthermore, reflecting on the wider implications of policy makers' engagement with community arts, Francois Matarasso (2018:166) warns of the power and prevalence of 'conceptual institutionalisation' whereby funders expect that work will take shape 'in ways and within boundaries that are acceptable' to them (also Whelan and Ryan, 2016).

Dialogue about such tensions and how they are negotiated was central to the ICAF programme. A session intriguingly entitled 'the Hardcore Club' was led by a panel of speakers from Junction Arts (Derbyshire), Citizens Theatre (Glasgow), Drama Box (Singapore), Stut Theater (Utrecht) and Rotterdam's Wijktheater. Coined by Eugene van Eerven, here 'Hardcore' refers to arts praxis that is deeply embedded in community contexts and where communities exercise authority and ownership over the substance, form and transmission of the work produced, while collaborating with professional artists and facilitators. Discussants reflected on their organisations' long histories and on the power of their aesthetic and social contributions to the cultural life of their areas. But, as the conversation developed and involved the audience, there was acknowledgement of community arts' lost radicalism, of the need to reimagine ways of working in the face of the online world's displacement of neighbourhood and place, and of the changing textures and meanings of belonging in everyday community life. Questions were posed about the rise of the far right, and its implications for a democratic vision of arts practice. If, and as more, communities seemingly embrace exclusionary, racist and antimigrant worldviews, what kinds of stories might they want to share with the world? The appeal to

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participatory values in both community arts and community development seems to presume that an ultimate symmetry between the politics of workers/facilitators and those of community members is possible and even probable; but in truth, those values are contested and fragile (Meade, 2009; Ife, 2020). How confident can we be that a progressive vision of/from community arts can survive contact with an increasingly expansive politics of suspicion and ressentiment? For contributors to the ICAF discussion, and as Gary Fraser (2025) and Jim Ife (2020) acknowledge, simplistic invocations of 'community voice' are not sufficient for these populist times: participatory praxis means recognising the difficulty but necessity of forging dialogue and deliberation in the face of anger, polarisation and skewed power relationships.

Other changes are generating crises of confidence in community arts practice. There is a sense that funders' managerialist demands and resistance to 'risk' are eroding opportunities for autonomy and experimentation; a mundane tyranny of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and Logic Models. Listening to this discussion, I remembered the enforced roll-out of KPIs in Ireland during the post-crash transformation of community development (Power, 2014) and community workers' frustrations at the state's demands for pre-emptive knowability about a praxis that should, by definition, be open-ended and somewhat unpredictable. Community arts practitioners in this session could remember a time when 'change' or 'outcomes' did not need to be prescribed in advance, but such memories may be receding as new generations of community members and workers experience a funding landscape where KPIs are entirely normalised, constituting the very stuff of purpose and recorded value (see Whelan and Ryan, 2016). Productions and/or Processes? What art can say Unsurprisingly, there were opportunities for collective making and doing at ICAF 2026. For example, in a day-long

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workshop, facilitated by Ruth Ben-Tovim called *Town Anywhere: Rehearsing the Future,* there were opportunities to build a city out of cardboard, string, paper, tape, branches, markers and other bits and bobs. We were guided through a layered process that moved from individual to small group to whole workshop levels of involvement, as we imagined the ideas, ambitions, and structures that could define a city in 2036. Architecture that could accommodate deliberative self-government and arts practice; spaces for play, fun and the collective growing and eating of food; institutions that would enable skill-sharing, community education and the actualisation of rights; these articulated a non-negotiable solidarity that contrasts with the real world's retrenchment of the social state or what Craig Gilmore and Ruth Wilson Gilmore call 'organised abandonment' (Gilmore, 2022). Signing up for the workshop, I had various ideas about what I might contribute to such a session, but was surprised to find myself preoccupied on the day with thoughts of algorithms, online data and tech monopolies, the unaccountability and extractivism on which they are founded, and I worked with others towards the creation of what we designated a 'democratic data centre'. My surprise at where this prefigurative workshop took me was a reminder of the alchemical, unsettled and unsettling character of good community arts processes; how they help us come to know our own minds in and through our collaborations with others.

However, many other ICAF events and activities were experienced from the positionality of audience member or spectator. There were impressive productions, watched by hundreds of people, and performed on the kind of theatre stage that will never become available to most community groups or projects. And, of course, facilitating and securing this kind of wider, international public exposure is a real achievement for both ICAF and the artists/performers.

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Declan McGonagle (2007:426) has argued that 'the sustained marginality of community arts practice' has been at least partly determined by its failure 'to access the means of distribution', i.e. 'those key organizational and institutional mechanisms, galleries, theatres…which not only provide public experience of the arts, but also validation for arts activity'. But if/when this transition into the institutions occurs, conceptions of quality, value and worth change too as productions are encountered by 'consumers' who know little or nothing about the collective and participatory processes behind them. Unless audiences are afforded insights into those distinctive approaches to production, and why they matter, the art may be experienced as 'issue-based', 'political' or even 'socially engaged', but not necessarily as expressing 'community'. At ICAF 2026 some of the large-scale productions ran workshops where they discussed their praxis in depth, otherwise it might not have been obvious if and how they were community-led. Does this matter? Perhaps not, if our register of value centres on entertainment, provocation, professionalism, and reach. But the wider project of cultural democratisation is inhibited if we cannot learn about the *howness* and *whyness* of the work's coming together.

Productions were strongly attuned to the multiple, interlocking crises of our times and demonstrated the eloquence with which artistic form and aesthetic devices can capture complex societal dynamics. *An Fara* (it has begun) – an expression from Kaduna in Northern Nigeria that warns of coming threats – was primarily a dance piece but it embraced other media too as it evoked the impending and already evident consequences of climate change in Africa. How is it possible that, through their movements across the stage, dancers can convey aspects of ecocide, drought, species loss and militarised violence? Companhia Nova de Teatro's *Apátridas (Stateless)* was performed by four actors from Brazil and Angola. Adopting from the Greek myths the names Cassandra, Hecuba, Prometheus and Hercules, their individual monologues confronted the demonisation and criminalisation of migration today. Together they rejected

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conventional constructions of a 'migration crisis', to highlight instead various 'crises of inequality', how displacement is enforced through authoritarianism, militarism, the destruction of life-worlds, and the persistence of (neo)-colonialist asymmetries of power across the world-system.

Community Arts About and Against the Crises of Legitimacy

Finally, I want to end this paper with some thoughts on another crisis that was exposed and challenged by contributors to ICAF. Exemplified by the Dutch (Childcare) Benefits Scandal, that came to light in 2018, it relates to loss of trust in the caring professions and institutions of the welfare state, a 'crisis of legitimacy' exacerbated by their lack of trust in the integrity and dignity of welfare 'subjects'. As Arts and van den Berg (2025:178) explain, 'One of the largest public and political scandals in recent Dutch history' it 'concerns at least 35,000 parents of young children that were wrongfully accused of committing fraud with benefits that were to compensate for childcare costs'. Parents were required to 'pay back' all benefits received, amounting to thousands of euros, within impossibly short time frames. The scandal resulted from a cocktail of anti-fraud rhetoric, get-tough policy, institutional racism, and the deployment of algorithmic 'detection' tools that targeted people with supposedly 'non-Dutch' surnames, lone parents and residents of certain postcodes. The processes of recognition, restitution and redress for victims are ongoing, but impacted parents lost livelihoods, homes, liberty and in some cases their children. Along with the minsters and government departments responsible for rolling-out the policy, judges, social workers and police contributed to the *de facto* criminalisation of the parents involved. In the ICAF workshop *Theatre as an Institutional Mirror*, we heard how Rotterdam's Wijktheater was initially approached by victims of the scandal with a view to accessing a place to meet. Over a three-year period relationships deepened, leading to the co-creation of theatre pieces that articulated parents' experiences,

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frustrations and grief about their treatment by the welfare system. Since then, the play has travelled the Netherlands, and it has been performed in parliament and local government contexts. The scandal robbed parents of their agency, but participants reclaimed it somewhat though their enactment of ownership over the theatre pieces, their form and contents. A play can never unravel injustice on such a scale, but community arts processes like this are powerful in their cultivation and demonstration of solidarity; in their exposure of oppressive state apparatuses; and in their movement between and conjoining of ideas and affect, individual narratives and collective struggles, despair and possibility. Highlighting a crisis of legitimacy that centres on psychiatric 'care' the Catalonian production *Eucaristia* effects the kind of onstage liberation of minds, bodies and language that upends hegemonic understandings of the mental illness/wellbeing dyad. The artistic company BROTS involves actors who live or have lived with psychiatric diagnoses. *Eucaristia* draws on their personal experiences to highlight the dehumanisation, violence and damage that results from institutional and professional domination over societal responses to mental distress. That it does so through the embrace of humour, absurdity and oblique interactions with vegetables, renders this production profoundly radical in form and intent. There are few concessions to normative sense-making, and no pleas for inclusion or a bit more understanding. The production effects a kind of 'Mad Pride' in 'Mad Knowledge' actively rebutting societal stigma and the (potential) sympathy of the audience. But it also skewers other institutional dynamics and disciplinary techniques. At the end of the play, we are prevented from leaving before we have completed the obligatory 'evaluation form' – another routinised measurement of art's impact and outcomes. But in this case, the

questionnaire reads like a surrealist text. And when evaluations are completed and returned, out come the performers who proceed to shred them before reading, right before our eyes. It's

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an illustration of something that doesn't always happen when we focus on lived experience; how recognition of one site of power and domination can inspire sensitivity to others; how diverse critiques and resistances can be articulated together at the same time. *Eucaristia*, which means communion, seems like a most appropriate name for this production and all that it stands for, a worthy ambition for community arts in this time of crisis.

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What does it look like when young people have power?

Reflections from a Scottish Youth Centre

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Keywords: Empowerment, youth, youth workers, adultism Introduction

How was this article born?

This article emerged from an international doctoral research stay undertaken by one of the authors at the University of Glasgow. Both authors are grounded in the fields of youth work and social practice, drawing on their professional experience to inform their academic and pedagogical perspectives. The article responds to an ongoing tension: although youth empowerment has become a widely recognised principle in youth policy and rights-based discourse - including its implicit recognition within the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1991) - its implementation in everyday socio-educational practice remains complex and often contradictory. Efforts to foster youth empowerment are shaped not only by the assumptions and expectations held by both young people and youth workers regarding their own capacity for agency and participation, but also by broader structural conditions marked by inequality, individualisation, and weakening forms of community engagement. Throughout the research stay[1], the authors collaboratively developed shared perspectives, working hypotheses, and analytical frameworks that ultimately led to the design and facilitation of two youth empowerment workshops within a youth organisation, one involving young people and another involving youth workers. The reflections generated before, during, and after these workshops, together with the analysis of the sessions themselves, form the basis of this article.

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Framing the Study – Perspectives on Youth: Conflict, Conformity or Opportunity?

Multiple perspectives of youth exist. Sociologically, young people can be seen as sources of social disruption, as citizens in training, or as key drivers of societal progress (James and McGillicuddy, 2001). These perspectives emphasise the need for a nuanced understanding of the approaches taken within youth work contexts. Young people may be viewed as disengaged, underperforming or as capable of achieving great potential with the right support. The views on young people held by youth workers shapes the way they work, and the outcomes for young people. Embodying 'alfirmo', which means 'conveying the belief in people's ability to achieve positive change, demonstrating care and compassion for people, and providing the necessary support when needed to help them achieve their goals' (Sheridan and Mungai, 2021, p.6). Young people may represent an opportunity for community and societal development, particularly when provided with education and resources that meets their needs.

Youth policy has shifted from viewing young people as problematic to underlining young people as a positive resource (Dunne et al., 2014). Nevertheless, dominant groups continue to disregard young people's potential. According to Corney et al. (2022, p.678), young people are 'marginalised by the specific social, political, cultural and economic contexts in which they live' and face adultism, in which adults are positioned as superior. Sheykhi (2021) emphasises the importance of understanding young people within their broader social context. Youth work settings provide spaces in which to explore the intersecting factors that influence young people's day-to-day experiences, usually under the banner of youth participation or youth empowerment approaches (Sala-Torrent and Planas-Lladó, 2024).

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Youth Empowerment – We all know what it means? Right?

Empowerment has been a popular term since 1970s (Ciraso et al., 2023) and the body of research on youth empowerment has increased notably over the past 20 years (Planas-Lladó & Úcar, 2022). Planas-Lladó & Úcar (2022), and Jennings et al. (2006) call for a shift from viewing youth as passive recipients of services to active agents of change within their communities. Jennings et al (2006) identified 6 key dimensions of critical youth empowerment: 1) a safe environment, 2) meaningful participation, 3) power sharing between youth and adults, 4) critical reflection, 5) participation in the sociopolitical sphere and 6) integration of individual and community.

The concept of empowerment on which this study is based is the one developed by Soler et al. (2017)**.** According to these authors**:**

> 'Empowerment is a process that increases the chances of individuals being able to decide and act consistently on everything that affects their own life, participate in decision-making and intervene in a shared and responsible way in relation to that which affects the community of which they form a part. This requires two conditions: that individuals acquire and develop a series of personal capacities [...] and that the environment enables them to effectively exercise those capacities. (p. 22)

Planas-Lladó and Úcar (2022) constructed an inventory of 9 dimensions of youth empowerment shown in Table 1. In each field of action, educators can conceive empowerment in different ways. This means they may attempt to enable the dimensions of empowerment in different ways.

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Table 1 The 9 dimensions of youth empowerment by Planas-Lladó and Úcar (2022)

Dimension	Definition
1. Self-esteem	a positive attitude towards oneself that allows one to appreciate and value oneself, thereby facilitating relations with other people on an equal footing, without feeling inferior or superior
2. Responsibility	the ability for individuals to assume and carry out the tasks entrusted to them and their own decisions, accepting the consequences that may arise from this.
3. Effectiveness	the ability to achieve the desired objectives
4. Community identity	an awareness of sharing socio-cultural elements with a group that identifies as a community;
5. Meta-learning	awareness regarding one's own learning
6. Participation	being part of and/or taking part in something
7. Autonomy	the ability to equip oneself with objectives and one's own rules of behavior that make it possible to undertake and self-manage initiatives and actions
8. Teamwork	the interaction between a group of people who intentionally collaborate to achieve a common goal
9. Critical ability	the ability to formulate one's own arguments and confront them with external ideas

There is, however, consensus on the distinction between individual empowerment and community and social empowerment (Checkoway, 1997; Zimmerman, 2000). Ciraso et al. (2023) surveyed 696 educators from various contexts and focused on how educators can enable young people to empower themselves. They found that formal educators tended towards individual empowerment outcomes, whereas those in informal contexts focused more on collective and social empowerment in young people. Crouzé et al. (2022) also suggest that non formal educational spaces are a fertile site for practices of empowerment and engagement.

There is more capacity for flexibility in non-formal spaces, with less of a hierarchy than in formal contexts, also the immediate environment is the most important factor for enabling

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empowerment in young people (Llena et al, 2023) Young people in Sheridan's (2018, p.211) study of youth participation practice in North Ayrshire, Scotland, greatly appreciated working with youth workers 'on the same level' still recognising that youth workers have professional boundaries. This reflects one of Freire's (1996, p.129) principles - 'the importance of pedagogical space', which emphasises the need to create the right space in which young people can thrive. Research suggests, the hardest to reach young people are often the most marginalised (Evans & Kruger, 2012). Ward et al's. (2024) study shows how youth work in high-poverty communities is necessary and valuable to contribute to Scottish policy and to make the youth voice heard. The right for young people to participate is recognised and accepted in Scotland, United Kingdom and internationally (Lundy, 2018). However, not all the groups are equally engaged in civic development.

Research Design

The project took the form of a small, qualitative case study (Yin, 2012) involving participants from a purpose-built youth project that has operated for over 25 years in Scotland. The preliminary study, approved by a University of Glasgow Ethics Committee, was intended as a scoping exercise for a future project involving young people and youth workers from Glasgow, and from Girona. Purposive sampling (Campbell et al., 2020) was used to select the youth project; it is a long-established youth facility that promotes youth participation and involves young people in its Board of Directors. Two focus groups took place, one with young people (7 participants, aged 16 and 17 years old, who were doing a community-based learning unit as part of their school curriculum) and the other with youth workers (15 participants, a mix of voluntary (young leaders), sessional, and full-time youth workers).

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The focus groups with both young people and youth workers involved them working in pairs and trios and each group was given a blank booklet that had 3 sections to complete. This was called the 'Magic Booklet' – a description for which can be found here. Two sections of the booklet are visible, and one section is hidden. In the first section, both groups were asked to capture their perspectives on what it looks like when young people have power; youth workers were also asked how communities benefit when young people use their power. In the second section, the young people described what they feel are the benefits to communities when young people use their power. In the focus group with youth workers, the second section asked what young people need to empower themselves. They captured their ideas with words, symbols, or drawings. To familiarise them with concepts associated with youth empowerment, both were asked to rank statements associated with dimensions of empowerment (Ciraso et al., 2023). Young people were asked to rank the following statements, individually, based on what they felt was the most to least important element in terms of helping them achieve their own empowerment. To get some sense of the youth workers' perspectives of young people, they were asked to rank the same statements based on what they thought would be 'most important' to 'least important' for young people.

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Table 1. Statements about youth empowerment. Adapted from the dimensions of empowerment defined by Ciraso et al. (2023).

- ***Getting involved in projects that help my community***
- ***Taking responsibility for my decisions and actions***
- ***Understanding the nature of everyday problems***
- ***Feeling good about myself and knowing my strengths and limits***
- ***Knowing how to learn about things that I'm interested in***
- ***Being able to take the steps to achieve my goals***
- ***Being able to make decisions based on my hopes and beliefs***
- ***Feeling part of a group of people where we share things in common***
- ***Being able to work, and communicate, with others***

Having completed the ranking exercise, the participants returned to their pairs and trios to complete the Magic Booklet. The hidden section was revealed. Young people were asked to capture their thoughts on the benefits of youth empowerment, and the youth workers were asked what the youth project does to promote youth empowerment. When it became apparent that some of the youth participants struggled to contemplate this idea. We suggested that they could refer to the statements they had ranked for some inspiration, which some did.

In the final stage of the focus groups with youth participants and youth workers, they were invited to record their thoughts on feedback murals. On one mural, participants were invited to place an emoji sticker in the section that best reflected how they felt about the session e.g., happy, neutral, or unhappy, that captured how they felt about the session. On the other mural, they placed a sticker beside the statement that best captured their final thoughts in relation to the topic – see *Image 1* as an example from the focus group with young people:

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Image 1 I would like to know more about how to empower myself – Young People's Mural

Individual reflections and the transcription of the focus group activities were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2022) process of thematic analysis. As an exploratory project, the intention is not to make claims about youth work and young people in Scotland. The themes, however, will serve as the basis of a future project involving youth workers and/or young people. The hope is that this article provokes some thought and discussion about current youth work practice, inviting practitioners to reflect on their own practice.

The Insights Gained

Overarching Theme From the youth perspective – The Individual Comes First

The magic booklet provided a space for self-reflection about power, the benefits to communities, but also about what it means to feel empowered. The young people appeared to be unfamiliar with the concept of power and empowerment; however they were prompted to give examples from their day-to-day experiences within school and within the youth project. The most important thing to them is that they have opportunities for self-development, from both the Magic Booklet and Ranking exercise. It is, perhaps, not surprising as the dominant educational experience they have had is within a formal setting. As some authors note (Ciraso et al., 2023; Sala-Torrent et al., 2024; Valdivia-Vizarreta et al.,2025), formal educators tend to focus on individual empowerment.

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Although not articulated as such, most appeared to have exercised their power and agency in some way, giving examples of young people using their voice to shape the provision within the youth project, or talking to politicians or school leaders. Only two of the groups mentioned any connection to the wider community, and this ranked low for all the youth participants.

There was a sense that youth participation projects are beneficial to young people, as noted in Ward et al. (2024), bringing improvements in mental and physical health. A specific example was the sense within the group that building connections with peers and youth workers tackles poor mental health and isolation. As Sheykhi (2021) notes, young people face many challenges in their day-to-day lives. Navigating these requires great effort for some young people, leaving little energy or motivation for the collective effort. Perhaps the most striking finding of all was from the Evaluation Mural, on which the young people placed stickers beside a range of sentences. There were 8 stickers beside this sentence: *I would like to know more about how to empower myself.* This relates to one point noted in the Magic Booklet 'sometimes things are complicated and we don't know where to start'. It is, perhaps, too easy to refer to the notion of youth empowerment without explicitly exploring what this looks like for young people.

Overarching Themes from Youth Workers' Perspectives – Opportunities for young people to grow and develop, and Positive Relational Support

As a reminder, the youth workers were to answer from the perspective of young people in the Ranking exercise. In other words, they had to reflect on their conceptions (and even prejudices) that they have about the young people with whom they work. Most of the youth workers connected young people having power with volunteering, employability opportunities, and support programmes. This is reflected in the first theme that youth work provides opportunities

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for young people to grow and develop, resonating with the key theme from the young people's focus group. It could be concluded that their youth work provision stems from seeing young people as citizens, or even adults, in training (James and McGillicuddy, 2001). There were 30 mentions by youth workers about youth empowerment connecting to volunteering and opportunities for young people to develop skills. As an informal educational context, this does not reflect the findings from Ciraso et al's. (2023) study, who noted that informal educators tend towards community empowerment.

The second theme, 'Positive Relational Support', relates to the perception that building connections through youth work can lead to benefits for young people. This

connects to Sheridan's (2018) emphasis on creating the right space in which positive relationships can grow. Young people thrive in environments where respect, recognition, and a sense of welcome are present. However, barriers such as low self-esteem, a lack of role models, and inadequate support systems can hinder their empowerment. This reflects the point from the focus group with young people, that 'young people sometimes feel anxious, even to ask for help'. Of note, there were 3 mentions that young people are not trusted, which may correlate with the two youth workers who did not participate in the ranking exercise as they felt young people would not be concerned about the dimensions of youth empowerment.

The predominant view from youth workers is that the youth project is actively promoting youth empowerment by providing a wide range of activities, training, and volunteering opportunities. However, 10 of the 15 youth workers noted that they do not think that young people think about their own empowerment.

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Final thoughts

The relevance of youth workers regarding youth empowerment and one concern

Youth workers play a critical role in constructing empowerment processes through their professional practices and the meanings they attribute to empowerment (Valdivia-Vizarreta et al., 2025). As Ord (2007) noted, youth work must go beyond the teaching of functional skills by enhancing young people's capacity for action within their communities. In this sense, youth work has historically been associated not only with individual development, but also with collective transformation and social change. However, this article raises a significant concern. Although youth work in Scotland continues to provide important support for young people's personal development and transformation, this does not necessarily translate into wider processes of community action or structural change. Despite the strong radical tradition of youth work grounded in Freirean critical pedagogy and collective transformation (Coburn, 2010), recent research suggests that contemporary youth work increasingly prioritises individual transformation over collective empowerment (SalaTorrent et al., 2024; Valdivia-Vizarreta et al., 2025; Ciraso-Calí et al., 2023), including within the Scottish context (Ward et al., 2024).

The individual dimensions come first

The findings from these workshops suggest that youth workers tend to prioritise the individual dimensions of empowerment over collective and community-oriented aspects. In many cases, empowerment was framed in terms of self-sufficiency, responsibility, autonomy, and personal development, while collective dimensions appeared less present in the programmes described by participants.

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However, focusing predominantly on individual responsibility risks reproducing neoliberal logics that overlook the social, economic, and political conditions constraining participation. From this perspective, empowerment becomes associated with adaptation and personal resilience rather than collective action or structural transformation. Drawing on Giroux's (2024) framework, critical pedagogy offers an alternative approach by repositioning empowerment within broader struggles for social justice and the transformation of unequal power relations.

From this perspective, empowerment should not be understood as a purely individual attitude or competency, but as a situated individual and collective action aimed at transforming one's environment. Empowerment depends not only on young people's willingness or abilities, but also on the structural conditions, opportunities, and spaces available to them (Morcillo, 2026).

How can youth workers shift these inequalities?

Despite the meaningful support provided by educators, the findings suggest that youth workers may also reproduce adult-centric discourses and practices that constrain young people's active participation in decision-making processes. This highlights an important tension within youth work practice, where support and empowerment can coexist with forms of control and unequal power relations. As Corney et al. (2022) argue, adultcentrism operates as a system of domination that privileges adult perspectives, limits young people's autonomy and participation, and particularly affects those already experiencing social disadvantage. In this context, youth workers may unintentionally reinforce these dynamics when young people's voices, capacities, or forms of participation are subordinated to adult expectations and institutional norms.

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In this context, socio-educational support can play an important role in mitigating inequalities. Trull et al. (2025) found that young people identify youth workers and community resources as facilitators of participation and integration processes. Likewise, Kohler Gonzalez and de Fátima Guareschi (2009) showed that young people participate less fully in community projects when their power to make decisions is restricted. These findings reinforce the importance of relational support based on connectedness, horizontality, safe spaces, and meaningful participation. At the same time, the findings suggest the need to move beyond individualised approaches towards a stronger sense of community and mutual support. While individualism may weaken social ties and feelings of belonging, community spaces can foster recognition, hope, care, and collective engagement (Morcillo, 2026).

Valdivia-Vizarreta et al. (2025) further argue that educators should prioritise accompaniment and proximity while also promoting reflective spaces regarding professional practice. However, an important challenge emerges when many youth workers are unqualified sessional staff or volunteers who have not yet accessed professional training. This becomes particularly relevant in relation to what Crouzé et al. (2022) describe as the "civic empowerment gap", whereby minorities, immigrants, and socioeconomically disadvantaged groups tend to participate less in civic life than dominant groups. In this context, youth work can become instrumentalised as a mechanism for integrating socially excluded young people into existing social orders, reproducing disciplinary and adult-centric models.

As the authors argue, youth workers are often positioned within a contradictory role: maintaining existing social structures while simultaneously supporting possibilities for individual and collective emancipation. Ciraso-Calí et al. (2023) found that informal educators tend to focus more on community empowerment, whereas formal educators prioritise

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individual empowerment or individual development alone. This may suggest that the predominance of individual development within many youth projects reflects not only institutional pressures, but also limited understandings of what collective youth empowerment involves.

Overall, these findings reinforce the need to understand socio-educational action as a critical and emancipatory practice that goes beyond promoting the adaptation of young people to existing social structures. In this regard, youth workers should not only support individual development, but also act as agents of change capable of strengthening collective participation, questioning unequal power relations, and building bridges between young people, communities, and institutions (Morcillo, 2026). This requires stable socio-educational teams, reflective professional practices, and governance models based on dialogue and the meaningful inclusion of young people's voices.

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A case study of a unique model of adult education in northeast England: Ten years experience of the Explore member-run Lifelong Learning Programme

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Abstract: *Joseph Cowen Lifelong Learning Centre (JCLLC) was created in 2013 following the closure of the university-based Centre for Lifelong Learning (CLL). JCLLC is a charitable incorporated organisation (CIO) providing the member-run Explore Lifelong Learning programme, based on the model developed by its predecessor. Explore Lifelong Learning has survived existential threats including the Covid-19 pandemic and loss of its premises. This case-study reflects on its history, achievements and challenges. We share insight into how lifelong learning can be delivered at community level and valued for its personal and social benefits, with reference to survey responses of members. Keys to success have been committed member-volunteer leadership and support, a wideranging academic programme delivered by high-calibre tutors, a loyal core membership, organisational flexibility and adaptability, a lean financial model and excellent administrative support. The major ongoing challenge is to rebuild the membership base post-pandemic, whilst maintaining high standards in the academic programme.*

Key Words: Lifelong learning, adult education, volunteers, member-led, ageing, cognitive health

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Introduction and background

North-East England has a long history of independent learning. JCLLC takes its name from Joseph Cowen Jr., Liberal politician, MP for Newcastle upon Tyne 1874-1886, and advocate of workers' education programmes. (Newcastle University Library (2018), Newcastle University Library Special Collections and Archives n.d.). The social and personal benefits of education beyond childhood were recognised in the landmark 1919 'Adult Education Committee' report, commissioned in response to the need to rebuild post-war Britain. A century later, the 2019 Centenary Commission on Adult Education stated; Adult education must not be regarded as a luxury for a few exceptional persons here and there…….it is a permanent national necessity, an inseparable aspect of citizenship, and therefore should be both universal and lifelong.

The commission acknowledged the challenge of balancing adult education provision supporting economic prosperity against that which promotes individual flourishing. It concluded that the balance has been wrong, with damaging consequences, placing the onus on universities to provide accessible adult education, with recognition of the role of the voluntary sector. (Centenary Report on Adult Education, 2019).

History and context of the Centre for Lifelong Learning, JCLLC and Explore. For ten years the University of Newcastle CLL ran a successful extra-mural programme; approximately 3,000 part-time students on 300 courses in 100 venues across the north-east of England and Cumbria, provided by a small team of academic and administrative staff (Centre for Lifelong Learning, 2009).

There were challenges. Provision of openly accessible courses was incompatible with the University's research ambitions, and in 2003 it transferred its lifelong learning provision to the nearby University of Sunderland, though teaching remained on Newcastle's campus.

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In 2007, the UK government introduced the 'Equal or Lower Qualifications' (ELQ) policy. After 2009 no student was funded for working towards a qualification equal to or lower than that which they already possessed. Despite Sunderland University's continued support for the CLL programme, it and similar schemes across the UK seemed doomed. The CLL team came up with an innovative solution, refashioning the scheme on the model of gym membership. This required a pared-down programme that was academically attractive and financially self-sustaining. For a single annual fee (or monthly subscription), an adult student could access all courses offered.

From an educational perspective this had benefits. CLL students had been conservative in their learning choices, sticking to the same subject area, topic or tutor. Barriers to new learning were the cost and uncertain value of the new course, and the opportunity cost of losing the known value of a familiar course. The new model removed those barriers, promoting a richer and more diverse learning experience. This was lifelong learning on the traditional model of liberal adult education but freed from government and institutional constraints. The financial viability equation was straightforward: membership fees were balanced against fixed overheads plus costs of tutors and venues. Sunderland University supported the programme and the Explore scheme launched in October 2009, learners paying an annual fee set at about the cost of 3 courses per year under the previous structure. (Explore with the North-East Centre for Lifelong Learning, 2012). The reaction from learners and tutors was polarised. For many, the programme was liberating, for others this change was too radical.

The CLL Explore programme ran for 4 years, a remarkable achievement by the team who had invented, designed and delivered a novel scheme for lifelong learning. In 2010, Explore won the Universities Association for Lifelong Learning (UALL) National Award for its 'creativity,

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innovation, impact and transferability' (Universities Association for Lifelong Learning (UALL), 2011). The University of Sunderland was generous in its support but, in 2013, new financial pressures meant that the CLL and its Explore programme was no longer sustainable and was closed.

Joseph Cowen Lifelong Learning Centre and its new Explore programme:

Urgent discussions were held to consider options. Could Explore run as an independent community organisation? The University responded positively, releasing assets and intellectual property rights. A learner-led steering group acted rapidly and decisively. The new organisation was established in 2013 as a voluntary and democratic body which adopted the model of the award-winning CLL Explore scheme. It took the name of Explore Lifelong Learning but, as a legal entity, became Joseph Cowen Lifelong Learning Centre, to acknowledge its origins (Explore Lifelong Learning, n.d.). Once again, north-east-based adult education was to innovate, and an entirely new model of adult education in the UK was launched.

Explore Lifelong Learning 2013 to 2024

The first year

A calculation was made of the income required to fund an academic programme, and how this translated into member numbers and annual subscriptions. The new Explore Lifelong Learning scheme was launched and advertised; subscribers to the previous programme formed most of the membership. Previous CLL tutors supported the new venture and provided the core of the academic programme. Accommodation was found in central Newcastle upon Tyne, close to transport links, providing teaching rooms, an office, and shared social space.

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Office furniture and IT equipment were donated by Sunderland University; overheads and other expenditure were kept to a minimum. Management and administrative functions, including programme planning, marketing, internal and external communication and financial management, were undertaken by learner volunteers. The first year ended with over 200 members, a small financial surplus and an optimistic outlook for continued viability.

2014 to 2024

From 2014 to 2020, JCLLC and its Explore programme expanded and developed; member numbers increased to around 220. With increased income, annual teaching hours were increased to 800+. Evening and Saturday morning sessions were introduced to accommodate members with weekday commitments. External partnerships were developed with local universities, NHS research departments and academic organisations. A generous legacy enabled endowment of an annual public lecture, professional input into marketing, production of a promotional film (Explore Lifelong Learning Promotional Video n.d.), purchase of equipment, and provision of a financial reserve.

Challenges and setbacks

Member recruitment and retention

An ongoing marketing campaign was needed to recruit new members. 'Taster days', when interested people were invited to sample short talks, with refreshments and opportunities for informal chats with members, proved successful recruitment events. Leaflet distributions and social media were less effective; media interest was hard to engage. Word-of-mouth was the most successful mode of recruitment, but the pool of prospective members was limited.

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Member retention was equally important. When offering feedback, most non-renewing members cited lifestyle changes; dissatisfaction with the programme was an infrequent cause and many rejoined when circumstances permitted.

Covid-19

In March 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic arrived. As the country went into lockdown, Explore ceased face-to-face teaching. There were no contingency plans for this situation, nor any experience of online learning. The demographic of Explore's membership was older adults, many with limited engagement with the digital world. One tutor undertook to deliver his course by Zoom, a new concept to most members. A trustee with IT skills and training experience familiarised herself with the system, produced training materials, and supported members and tutors as they embraced this new mode of learning with varying degrees of enthusiasm. In April 2020, Explore launched its programme of online and email courses. Explore's administrator worked from home and maintained regular communication with members and tutors. A survey in June 2020 of tutors and members was encouraging. Of 70% of members who responded, 80% were participating in the online programme. Over that summer, Covid restrictions were eased. A return to face-to-face teaching seemed possible, then a second wave of Covid loomed. Restrictions were re-imposed, the programme was again moved online and was re-launched in September 2020. Existing members were encouraged to rejoin at a reduced subscription to reflect the limited teaching hours. Gratifyingly, most did. It was not feasible to recruit new members, so JCLLC faced a reduction in income, though costs were also lower due to savings on room hire costs and tutor fees for fewer sessions. Attendance at online lectures was encouragingly high; member feedback was positive. Active participation and discussion were

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possible; pre-session informal chats took place. Without the need for travel, members with health issues or caring responsibilities could continue to participate. Others engaged with a wider range of different course topics. Factors in Explore's survival were the flexibility and decisiveness of the small organisation, the shared values and motivations of the membership and team, and a culture of open-minded learning that enabled Explore to continue to function under unprecedented and unpredictable circumstances.

Loss of Premises

In March 2021, as recovery from the pandemic was underway and in-person activities were cautiously resumed, JCLLC received the news that the building that was Explore's base was to be demolished and a new venue must be found. A church in central Newcastle offered suitable meeting spaces. Face-to-face teaching began there in October 2021 and is ongoing. Their volunteer-run cafe provides opportunities for social interaction whilst a 'hot desk' office arrangement consolidates the partnership. The impact of this move was mitigated by adaptations for remote working made during the pandemic.

Ten years on - JCLLC and Explore Lifelong Learning in 2024

Governance, management and administration

JCLLC was initially constituted as a community interest company (CIC), for expediency and reflecting its aims as a social enterprise. CICs pay tax on surpluses and do not enjoy other advantages of registered charities, so in 2017, JCLLC was converted to a charitable incorporated organisation (CIO). CIO members are subscribing learners. An Annual General

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Meeting (AGM) deals with formal business, including adoption of the annual report and appointment of trustees. Trustees are recruited from members and tutors, with a three-year rolling programme of elections, to ensure the necessary skills for charitable educational organisation are met. The AGM, held face-to-face and online, is also an open forum to air views about the organisation and its future and is a significant occasion for dialogue between trustees and membership. Management and day-to-day functioning of Explore are led and delivered by its members. JCLLC trustees undertake financial management, marketing and communication, programme planning and overseeing of administration, in addition to governance and strategic planning.

The programme is planned and delivered by a volunteer team of members advised by a trustee with an academic background. Every teaching session requires front-of-house and IT volunteer support. Thus far, Explore has been fortunate in finding the necessary expertise and commitment among its membership. Some have relevant experience, many functions are undertaken by retired professionals learning new skills. Professional administrative support has been crucial to Explore's ongoing success. In 2014 a part-time administrator post was established, providing continuity and a personal point of contact as well as organisational and communication expertise.

Financial considerations and risks

JCLLC is self-financing; over 90% of income comes from membership subscriptions. This creates vulnerability as, unless enough members join and pay annually up-front, income may be inadequate to fund the programme. Financial policies have been adapted to meet changing

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needs. A flexible payment scheme has been introduced allowing termly payments, and subscriptions pegged to pre-pandemic levels. This impacts on the stability of JCLLC's income but has been possible because JCLLC has reserves, further boosted by reduced expenditure during the pandemic. JCLLC's main financial risk is that programme costs are the same with 200 members or 140 (pre- and post-Covid levels respectively). When numbers decline there is pressure to increase the subscription or reduce content; either could risk member recruitment and retention.

Academic input and programme development

The Explore programme delivers a curriculum encompassing six 'strands': Art History, Practical Art & Design, 'Culture & Society' (includes History, Archaeology, Sociology, Law, Politics), Philosophy, Science & Mathematics, and 'Narratives' (Literature, Music, Film), delivered as one-off talks and lecture series; teaching styles vary from the didactic lecture to a seminar approach. Unusually in adult learning provision, there is no requirement for learners to sign up to sessions in advance, nor minimum numbers to proceed. The Explore approach welcomes speakers who might be considered niche, 'too academic' for general learners, or who come from backgrounds outside of formal education. Members are encouraged to suggest topics for study. Proximity to four universities has been crucial in enabling Explore to recruit excellent freelance tutors, including recently retired academics or practising experts in their field. Many comment that they enjoy engaging with the Explore community, who come from a wide range of backgrounds, are well informed and ready to participate in discussion and debate. New speakers must continuously be found, so programmers connect with local university departments and other networks to identify potential new recruits, whilst 'horizon

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scanning' for significant dates and themes. Online teaching has made it possible to engage tutors from outside the north-east region.

2024 and onwards – time for reappraisal

In 2024, JCLLC and its Explore scheme celebrated its 10th birthday, providing a stimulus to review, re-appraise and plan for its future.

Membership - profile and engagement – Summary of survey results

An online survey in February 2025 investigated the demographics of Explore members, their experiences of Explore and motivations for undertaking this lifelong learning programme. The survey requested a combination of quantifiable answers with free text. A link was sent to 144 current Explore members, 111 (77%) responded; quantifiable responses are tabulated in

Appendix 1.

Member demographics

Predominantly elderly, over twice as many women as men, most identify as White British. Most are fully or partially retired, live within a 10-mile radius of Newcastle upon Tyne and rely on public transport to attend.

Education and employment

Most are educated to degree level or above, with a range of professional employment, predominantly senior positions in education and healthcare.

Experiences of Explore Lifelong Learning

There is a high level of loyalty to Explore, though only a minority takes an active role in running the organisation.

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Experience of the Explore model

Most exploit the subscription model, attending sessions in several 'strands' and several times a week. Post-pandemic, Explore has retained face-to-face and online sessions, with a small number delivered by both. Members hold strong and divergent views about their preferred mode of delivery. Some regard face-to-face interaction as integral to learning; others value online access for various personal reasons. Top three benefits of Explore membership were identified as increased knowledge, mental stimulation and social interaction. Members also reported that learning and skills gained were useful in other areas of their lives, e.g. Zoom proficiency, other technical and non-technical expertise, but especially knowledge and ideas. Asked to identify distinctive features of Explore Lifelong Learning, 95 members provided 190 evaluable comments. 58 commented that the diversity and range of subjects offered are special; 45 complimented the high academic standard and excellence of tutors; 28 appreciated contributions made by fellow members, either in discussions or in creating a welcoming atmosphere and sense of community; 6 commented favourably on the venue and its accessibility; 19 commended the organisation's efficiency, communication and the work of member volunteers; 16 commented that the subscription model is unique and provides good value for money.

The future

Like other cultural organisations and compounded by cost-of-living concerns (Cultural Participation Monitor 2023). Explore has struggled to rebuild its membership post-pandemic. Recent retirees are harder to identify and contact, and the retirement age is rising. The proliferation of online resources during the pandemic opened competing opportunities for

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digital engagement, and many people lost the habit of going out. Some longstanding Explore members reassessed priorities for limited time and financial resources. The programme is popular with members for its good value and flexibility, but it can be difficult to 'sell' to prospective new members. Finding members willing to volunteer time and energy to supporting Explore is an ongoing challenge. JCLLC hopes to rebuild after the bruising experiences of recent years. Meanwhile it runs at a small financial loss, drawing on its reserves. Its priority is to restore member numbers to ensure sufficient income for the ongoing provision and consolidation of its academic curriculum. Active involvement of members is crucial to this process. The ethos of Explore, promoting 'learning for the love of learning' and offering flexible access, is attractive to open-minded and inquisitive people looking to sample a variety of subjects, without the constraints of accredited courses, and with the added benefits of social engagement. It is however accessed by only a small segment of the population, largely retired professionals and academics. To flourish, Explore must widen its demographic and diversity.

Conclusions

The benefits of lifelong learning to an ageing population, for well-being, cognitive health and social engagement, are well researched and documented (Molina, M.Á., Schettini, R. (2021), Zammit AR, Yu L et al., (2026). Government resources are currently targeted towards vocational courses aimed at extending employability, with scant attention paid to the potential health and social benefits of academic study in retirement (Narushima M, Liu J, Diestelkamp N. (2018).

Explore Lifelong Learning rose from the ashes of a university-based programme which was a victim of changed priorities and government policies. In defiance of expectations and in the

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face of existential challenges, Explore continues to thrive, though its longer-term future is uncertain. Running the programme is onerous for volunteers, and succession planning is vital. Social aspects are important in forging friendships and welcoming new and potential members. Explore's immediate challenge is to increase its membership to ensure future financial security. Thereafter, it must look to rebuilding and extending academic, creative and civic partnerships, and establishing its place in the network of adult and continuing education in the north-east of England region and beyond.

Appendix 1

Member Demographics

Age band	<50	50-59	60-69	70-79	80-89	90+
%	0	2	10	71	14	2
Analysis by gender	Male	Female				
%	32	68				
Ethnicity	White British	Other				
	95	5				
Travel distance	<10 miles	>10 miles				
%	61	39				

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Education and Employment

Employment status	Fully/ partially retired	Other		
%	97	3		
Previous employment	Education	Healthcare	Public sector	Other
%	46	26	20	8
Educational achievement	Degree or above	Postgraduate degree or diploma		Vocational or professional qualification
%	75	50		21

Membership Experience

Length of Membership	University CLL member	> 10 years	> 5 years	< 5 years
%	46	49	75	25
Nature of Membership	Unbroken	Rejoined after break		
%	86	14		

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Actively Involved in Running Explore?	Not actively involved	Regular volunteers	Major volunteers		
%	68	21	11		
Number of Strands Attended	5 Strands	4 Strands	3 Strands	2 Strands	1 Strand
%	18	31	34	14	3
Sessions Attended Per Week	4 to 8	1 to 3	1 or fewer		
%	31	56	13		
Perceived Benefits	Increased knowledge	Mental stimulation	New interests	Improved mental health	Social interaction
%	33	23	14	8	20

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The Carnegie Education Fund

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This year marks the 125th anniversary of The Carnegie Trust for the Universities of Scotland. As a Carnegie undergraduate fee grantee, I was among those invited to a celebratory event in Edinburgh to look back at the stories of the people and institutions the Trust has supported over the years and to hear about its plans for the future. My graduation 'story' was one of those displayed on a screen throughout the event.

I was brought up in a typical Glasgow red sandstone tenement, a two-bedroomed rented flat, close to the shop in the Gorbals where my dad, a pharmacist, worked for a chain of chemists. My brother and I belonged to the so-called 'golden generation', children born between the mid 1940s and mid-1950s in Britain's newly minted welfare state, who were more likely to be upwardly socially mobile than any generation before or since. We both attended Battlefield Primary and Queen's Park Secondary Schools, non-denominational state schools with a mixed working-class and (mainly lower-) middle-class intake. With three 'Highers' and three 'Lowers', I enrolled at Jordanhill College of Education, emerging three years later in 1965 with a DCE (Distinction) in primary teaching and a new love, Philosophy, born whilst penning my final essay on a practice central to Scottish education and its Presbyterian heritage, *discipline*.

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Two things stood in the way of following my new love: I had exhausted my local government grant entitlement, and I lacked one of the mandatory entry requirements for an Arts degree in Scotland –

Higher Latin. Fortunately, the University of Glasgow waived the latter and allowed my college diploma to stand in for a year of undergraduate study. This meant that I could complete my Honours degree in Mental Philosophy in three, rather than the usual four, years. The Carnegie Trust Tuition Fee Grant of £197 awarded to me in 1965 covered my fees in full, which my parents could not have done, when the average UK salary was c. £800. I acquired two further degrees whilst working, a postgraduate MA in Education and a PhD in educational philosophy. I owe my entire career as an educational researcher, adult educator and University professor to the Carnegie Trust. I am now Emeritus Professor of the University of Glasgow where I was Professor of Adult and Continuing Education, and Honorary Senior Research Fellow of its School of Education. I continue to write and publish books that aim to bridge the gap between the academic and the popular and to engage with social movements and a broader public. My book titles reflect this, including *The Stranger Within: On the Idea of an Educated Public* (2008); *Liberating Knowledge: Research, Feminism and Adult Education* (1999); *For a Radical Higher Education* (2003) with Tom Steele and Richard Taylor; and, most recently, *The Legacy: A Memoir – One Family's Role in Britain's Cover-Ups* (2022).

At the anniversary event referred to above, the history of the Trust was outlined by the Trust's Chairman, Ronnie Bowie, and its new five-year Strategic Plan announced by its Chief Executive, Dr Hannah Garrow. The plan reframes the Trust's founding aims in relation to the

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present higher education landscape, re-focusing its activities on promoting improvement within the wider higher education system as well as seeking to transform individuals' lives. To reflect the breadth of its mission, the Trust is adopting a new operating name for itself - the Carnegie Education Fund – whilst still officially retaining its original name.

The Carnegie Trust was established in 1901 through an endowment of $10 million in bonds donated by the Scottish-American philanthropist/industrialist Andrew Carnegie. Born in Dunfermline (where the Trust has its headquarters), he emigrated to Pennsylvania with his parents in 1848 aged 12 and went on to become one of the richest Americans in history. He believed that a university education should be attainable by any person of modest means who had the potential and motivation to learn at that level. By paying the fees of eligible students the Trust would, as its Strategic Plan for 2026-31 recalls, 'embed equity in Scotland's prestigious, but elitist higher education sector, granting access to the universities to those who would otherwise not have had the privilege'. Carnegie also saw the Trust as a vehicle for the improvement and expansion of Scotland's then struggling ancient universities. Within two years of its foundation, it was providing funding to around half the students attending university in Scotland. By the middle of the 20th century, it had transformed Scottish higher education through the creation of new buildings, libraries and laboratories, and the provision of student scholarships and grants towards research, travel and publication.

Joan Eardley, whose vibrant work is regularly on show at Edinburgh's Gallery of Modern Art, was a mid-century beneficiary of a Carnegie travel grant which facilitated her life-changing study tour of Italy from September 1948 to May 1949. Other famous alumni include Jennie Lee, a miner's daughter from Lochgelly, Fife, and the first Labour woman to represent a Scottish seat in the House of Commons. Half of her university tuition fees to attend the

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University of Edinburgh were paid by the Trust. She graduated with degrees in Arts and Law as well as a teaching certificate in 1927. After working briefly as a teacher, she was elected at a by-election, then general election, in 1929. In 1934 she married Aneurin Bevan who spearheaded the creation of Britain's National Health Service, launched in 1947, whilst Minister of Health in Attlee's new post-war Labour government.

Since 1901, the Trust has supported over 70,000 individuals. Today, the Scottish government's commitment to free university tuition fees means that most Scottish students who want to pursue a first undergraduate degree will have their fees covered. The Trust will continue to support students from low-income households who for one reason or another don't follow a straightforward path through higher education and do not qualify for government support. It will also introduce a new grant scheme to support low-income students to pursue postgraduate Masters degrees, and refocus its Vacation Scholarship scheme to support Scottish undergraduates from low-income households. Internship schemes to support such students to gain work experience are also under consideration, as are bursaries to supplement fee grants. In addition, it will fund research aimed at improved understanding of barriers to access and achievement for under-resourced and underrepresented groups; promote citizenship panels as part of a wider public conversation on these issues, and pursue debate among stakeholders about embedding equity of opportunity and outcome in higher education.

The SNP has now been in power in Scotland for nearly two decades, since 2007. Over a decade ago, Lucy Hunter Blackburn pointed to mounting evidence that free university tuition represents a middle-class hand-out by stealth: 'It's superficially universal, but in fact it benefits the better-off most, and is funded by pushing the poorest students further and further into debt'. The final chapter of *Higher Education in Scotland and the UK*, a study of higher education

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policy across the UK, concludes that free university tuition in Scotland has not produced the egalitarian, progressive outcomes claimed for it (Riddell 2015). A critical analysis by Tim Wigmore in the *New Statesman*, on 15 December 2015, endorses this, explaining that as a result of prioritising universal free university tuition over targeted grants, the *worst* place for poor students in the UK is Scotland. When less generous spending on bursaries by Scottish universities is taken into account (English institutions spend more than three times as much on bursaries because of their student fee income), many disadvantaged Scottish students will graduate with larger debt burdens than equivalent students in England. Furthermore, *Access in Scotland,* a report published in May 2016 by the Sutton Trust, warns that the free tuition fees policy has not improved application, acceptance or entry rates for the poorest in Scotland, as compared with countries that charge. It may even have backfired because of the need to cap the number of university places for home students so as to make the free tuition policy affordable. The failure of the Scottish university system to keep up with rising demand for places results in greater competition, and squeezing out youngsters from deprived backgrounds. In England, where the cap on places has been removed, students from less advantaged backgrounds are more likely to secure a university place.

It is in light of such findings that ten years on, the Carnegie Trust's current refocusing of its activities is welcome, including its plan to implement an internship scheme for graduates from low-income families, in view of the current crisis in young people's employment opportunities. As an independent body, it is not beholden to the Scottish government. As such, its reappraisal of the current higher education scene in Scotland, based on research, and the Trust's recalibration of its own role in relation to this, is of particular value.

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Review

Andy Burnham and Steve Rotheram, (2024) *Head North – A Rallying Cry for a More Equal Britain, Trapeze, UK, 272 pages, ISBN978-1-398-71974-3, Paperback, £22.00*

The rise of Andy Burnham to the premiership in the summer of 2026 is a further indication that Britain continues to live through an era of political disruption. In little more than a decade, the country has had seven Prime Ministers. The temptation is to attribute this instability to the shortcomings of individual leaders. A more convincing explanation, however, may be that Britain itself has become increasingly difficult to govern. This review explores the possibility that Burnham may prove to be a different kind of Prime Minister. His agenda, particularly in relation to the role of the state, local government, and the distribution of power across Britain, offers the prospect of significant social change. For readers of *Concept*, with an interest in public policy and democratic renewal, his ideas merit serious attention. Co-authored with Steve Rotheram, Mayor of the Liverpool City Region, *Head North* was published two years before Burnham became Prime Minister and takes the form of a series of conversations and reflections between the two politicians. While both authors make important contributions, the discussion that follows focuses principally on Burnham's political vision and the arguments he advances throughout the book.

The first half of the book is biographical, charting the experiences that shaped Andy Burnham's political outlook. He describes growing up in a working-class Liverpool family and identifies

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both the miners' strike and the campaign for justice for the Hillsborough victims as formative influences. These experiences fostered a conviction in the young Burnham that "Britain's economic and political system was often stacked against ordinary communities" (p. 21).

Burnham was the first member of his family to attend university, studying English Literature at Cambridge, where he developed a particular passion for poetry. He writes candidly about experiencing severe imposter syndrome during his years as an undergraduate, a feeling that would later return when he entered Parliament. He is also passionate about football and music, both of which feature prominently in his understanding of identity and place. Alongside the expected references to seminal Manchester bands such as The Smiths and The Stone Roses, he highlights Birmingham's UB40, whose name was derived from the unemployment benefit form familiar to many during the economic hardships of the early 1980s. These cultural references are not merely incidental. Music, like sport, has long been intertwined with questions of class, identity, and political belonging. Burnham's attendance at the funeral of former Stone Roses bassist Gary Mounfield, better known as Mani, where he paid his respects alongside figures such as Ian Brown and Liam Gallagher, reinforces the impression of a politician who remains closely connected to the working-class culture that shaped his formative years. The biographical section of *Head North* also traces Burnham's rise through the New Labour era, during which he served in the governments of both Tony Blair and Gordon Brown. He twice contested the Labour leadership, losing first to Ed Miliband in 2010 and later to Jeremy Corbyn in 2015. Growing increasingly frustrated with the culture and constraints of Westminster politics, Burnham decided to "head north", as the book's title suggests, becoming Mayor of Greater Manchester, a position he held for almost a decade. It is this period, and the political

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philosophy that emerged from it, that forms the most significant and compelling part of the book.

The political vision Burnham outlines in *Head North* is nuanced and resists easy categorisation within a conventional left-right framework. He presents himself as the product of contrasting Labour traditions, describing his father as embodying the values of 'Old Labour' and his mother as being more closely aligned with 'New Labour'. Burnham's mother is also a committed Christian, and he acknowledges the influence of Christian ethics on his political outlook, despite describing himself as a lapsed Catholic. Ideologically, he draws selectively from both old and new Labour traditions, frequently combining them through concepts such as 'aspirational socialism' and 'business-friendly socialism'. There is, however, one important aspect of his political philosophy that departs significantly from the assumptions associated with New Labour: his argument that four decades of neoliberalism lie at the root of Britain's social, political and economic problems. This period encompasses the governments of Tony Blair and may help to explain reports of tensions between Burnham and Blair. Burnham contends that Britain is not simply a 'deeply unequal country' but a 'deliberately unequal one' (p. 157). He characterises neoliberalism as a 'divisive ideology', defining it as 'the mantra that the market is the answer to everything', and argues that its assumptions became 'firmly planted in the mindset of Britain's political classes' (p. 225). Equally significant are the political conclusions that flow from this diagnosis. For Burnham, the British state must become more interventionist if it is to address what he sees as market-generated inequalities. This conception of the state as an active agent of social justice, and as a provider of publicly controlled goods and services, marks a clear departure not only from New Labour but also from much of the consensus that has shaped British policymaking over the past two decades.

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The word Burnham draws upon to articulate his interventionist vision is that of 'control'. This is a politically astute choice. By appropriating a word closely associated with the Brexit campaign's call to 'take back control', arguably one of the most effective political messages of modern times, Burnham repurposes the language to advocate greater public control, democratic accountability, and community influence over essential services. As Mayor of Greater Manchester, this involved greater control of the region's bus network, while his longer-term ambition extends to greater public control of water, rail, and energy. Housing provides a useful illustration of what he means by control. He argues that local authorities should become 'once again the overall guardians of housing', supported by enhanced powers over funding, planning, and investment (p. 231). Central to this vision is an expanded role for local government. He argues that 'for too long, decisions about regions like ours had been taken by people hundreds of miles away in London who didn't understand or care about the people where I lived' (p. 107). This critique is directed not only at marketisation but also at the highly centralised nature of the British state. Burnham's spirited defence of local government as a vital democratic institution is particularly striking. After a decade of austerity, during which local authorities disproportionately bore the brunt of reductions in public expenditure, Burnham's insistence on the importance of municipal government feels both timely and refreshing. He argues that 'Councils are the last line of defence for communities around the country and yet are treated as last in the queue when it comes to a funding priority' (p. 130). He even suggests that all central government officials should spend time working within local government structures in order to better understand the realities facing communities beyond Westminster (p. 130).

Head North sets out a wide-ranging programme of reforms that extends well beyond local government. Indeed, many of the policies outlined in the book have subsequently featured in

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Burnham's speeches since becoming Prime Minister. Social care is one of his foremost priorities. He advocates the creation of a National Care Service in which social care would be integrated more closely with the NHS, reflecting a broader commitment to treating care as a public good rather than a market commodity. Another key concern is the growing number of young people classified as NEETs (not in education, employment, or training), which Burnham estimates at around one million. For him, the exclusion of so many young people from education and employment constitutes a national crisis requiring urgent intervention. To address this challenge, he calls for a rebalancing of the relationship between higher and vocational education, challenging what he regards as a longstanding tendency to privilege academic routes over technical and vocational pathways. This debate is particularly relevant to community education practitioners, especially those working with young people in a policy landscape increasingly shaped by employability agendas.

Burnham also advances an ambitious programme of constitutional reform. He supports the abolition of the House of Lords and its replacement with an elected second chamber, while advocating proportional representation for Westminster elections. Such reforms would bring the electoral system at Westminster more closely into line with those operating in Scotland and many other European democracies. In addition, he calls for a fundamental reset of Britain's relationship with the European Union. In doing so, he becomes one of the few senior Labour politicians in England and Wales to argue openly that Brexit has been both a political and economic mistake.

Hitherto, this review has been positive about the vision Burnham outlines in *Head North*; however, a critical perspective is also necessary. Britain's social and economic problems are generational, structural, and deeply entrenched, and it is doubtful that they can be overcome

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through political will alone. While *Head North* is particularly effective in diagnosing many of the root causes of contemporary Britain's difficulties, Burnham is less convincing when addressing questions of implementation. Several proposals remain underdeveloped, with limited discussion of how they would be delivered or financed. In particular, the meaning of "public control" is often left ambiguous, and the extent to which this implies public ownership, nationalisation, or alternative forms of democratic governance is not fully explored.

At times, Burnham's attachment to northern identity appears somewhat romanticised. The repeated celebration of "northernness" as an inherently positive force occasionally risks obscuring the social, political, and economic complexities of the regions he seeks to champion. Similarly, the frequent references to football, while reflective of an important aspect of Burnham's personal and political identity, can become repetitive. Greater engagement with some of the other influences he references, including literature and poetry, would have provided a fuller account of the intellectual traditions that have shaped his political outlook.

More significantly, the limitations of localism and devolution receive relatively little attention. It is not always clear how devolving power will, in itself, generate the economic growth that Burnham identifies as a central policy objective. Likewise, the book says little about Scotland, despite notable parallels between Burnham's political outlook and policies associated with the SNP administrations of Alex Salmond and Nicola Sturgeon. This omission raises important questions about how Burnham's vision would operate within a multinational state and how a Burnham government might engage with continuing debates surrounding Scottish independence.

Beyond the constitutional questions lies the wider challenge posed by international capitalism. These constraints are considerable and include the pressures placed upon national governments

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by multinational corporations, financial institutions, and international bond markets. Such forces raise important strategic questions about the extent to which national governments can pursue programmes of state intervention, redistribution, and economic transformation. Burnham's own political record also merits scrutiny. Most notably, he supported the 2003 invasion of Iraq, a decision he acknowledges as mistaken in the book, although the issue is dealt with only briefly. He was also a prominent figure within New Labour, a project that, according to many of its critics, moved Labour beyond traditional social democracy towards a centre-left variant of neoliberalism. His political journey has led some commentators to question whether Burnham possesses a coherent ideological core. As the oft-repeated joke has it, a Blairite, a Brownite, and a Corbynite walk into a bar, and the bartender asks, "What would you like to drink, Mr Burnham?" To give Burnham the benefit of the doubt, however, political trajectories are rarely static. One of the strengths of *Head North* is the insight it provides into his ideological development over time. Burnham emerges as a politician willing to reflect critically on both his own assumptions and the broader political traditions that shaped him. Rather than presenting a fixed ideological blueprint, the book offers a portrait of political evolution, illustrating how his views have been shaped by experience in government, opposition, and local leadership.

The significance of *Head North* may lie less in the detail of its policy prescriptions than in what it reveals about the political outlook of a figure who has successfully navigated an era characterised by uncertainty, instability, and declining trust in political institutions. Understanding the sources of Burnham's appeal therefore requires looking beyond the policies themselves to the style of politics he represents. It is to this question that the final section of this review now turns.

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The most effective politicians are often storytellers and educators who, in the words of Tony Benn, act as signposts rather than weathercocks. Burnham displays many of these qualities. In addition to being an exceptionally effective communicator, arguably one of the most accomplished political communicators of his generation, he appears to have grasped something that eluded his predecessor, Keir Starmer, namely, that the political landscape of contemporary Britain differs fundamentally from that which sustained New Labour in the 1990s. The social, economic, and political conditions that underpinned the cautious centrism of that era have largely disappeared, creating greater space for a more ambitious and interventionist political project. In an age of political disruption and declining trust in institutions, governments increasingly struggle to rely solely on managerial competence or technocratic solutions.

Indeed, it was arguably the limitations of such a technocratic approach that contributed to Starmer's political difficulties. In this respect, Burnham may be understood not as an antidote to populism but as an advocate of a distinctly social democratic form of it. His critique of distant and unresponsive Westminster elites echoes what Chantal Mouffe (2019) describes as 'left populism': a strategy that mobilises popular grievances against established centres of power in pursuit of political change. Similar themes have been employed successfully by the SNP, whose political appeal rested upon the claim that Scotland was neglected by out-of-touch political elites in Westminster. Burnham advances a comparable argument with respect to Greater Manchester and the North of England, presenting devolution and local control as mechanisms through which communities can reclaim political agency. It is a message that appears to resonate with a significant section of the electorate.

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Burnham's ideological flexibility is another notable strength of the book. He resists conventional left-right categorisations, proving as willing to speak about working-class aspiration as he is about inequality and class. Although aspects of his appeal undoubtedly rest on questions of identity, and his northern roots and Liverpudlian accent remain important political assets, he grounds his politics in a broader narrative of democratic renewal and the constructive use of state power.

Reading *Head North*, one gains the impression that Burnham believes any revival of British social democracy will require the left to reconnect with voters beyond its metropolitan base and move beyond some of the forms of hyper-liberal identity politics that have characterised sections of the contemporary left in recent years. Crucially, he appears to recognise that the capacity of the state to act as a force for good is closely tied to questions of national renewal. One reason why the populist right has often been more successful than its left-wing counterparts in recent years is that it has offered a coherent account of national sovereignty and identity at a time when many on the left were questioning the continuing relevance of the nation state (see Fraser, 2008). Burnham's political vision seeks to reclaim the language of nationhood, community and belonging, and to mobilise it in support of a broader project of social democratic renewal. For readers of *Concept*, *Head North* is a stimulating and timely book, full of fresh ideas and political insights. It is a work that I would highly recommend.

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