

# The War on the Commonweal: Making a Stand in 2014

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## *Abstract*

*The onslaught from neo-liberal orthodoxy is a war that not only targets the most vulnerable, but relentlessly attacks the social fabric 'the commonweal' that binds us together. The referendum debate in Scotland is creating a unique moment in our history to challenge the picture that is constantly presented to us, to invigorate our democratic frontline and to draw inspiration from others who have taken a stand in finding an alternative future.*

## **Introduction**

Cathy McCormack, a community activist and writer from Easterhouse in Glasgow, was the first person I heard talking about this war in the 1980s. I was a community worker in Pilton, Edinburgh and she was a member of the Easthall Tenants' group in Glasgow and we were both involved in anti-dampness campaigns. She described this 'war without bullets' - a war fought with briefcases, not guns - an attack on working class people (McCormack 1999). At that time, not only did families in Scotland have to live in appalling damp housing conditions which caused ill-health, misery and expense, but they were being blamed for them as well. The cause of the 'condensation' was seen to be hanging up wet washing or boiling too many kettles. It was also a psychological war. Their ill-health was seen solely as a result of their own 'unhealthy lifestyles' - eating too many fish suppers or taking too little exercise. Attention was successfully directed away from their social and economic conditions. I think that the war has intensified since then and become even more damaging.

## **The war without bullets**

The orthodoxy of neo-liberal capitalism, unleashed in the late 1970s, and early 1980s under Thatcher and Reagan centres on a belief that market forces are the key to

economic growth. To be effective, the market has to be freed from the heavy hand of the state: no impediments to the free flow of capital like fussy regulations from a ‘nanny state’; public bodies de-regulated; the labour force made more ‘flexible’, unlocked from unions and employment conditions. This is the only way forward and ‘there is no alternative’.

The ‘Big Bang’ in 1986 - Thatcher’s de-regulation of banking in the City of London - let in a huge wave of investment banking. Even some bankers thought it was savage:

It was, in every sense, a revolution. It was messy and there was blood all over the place. Unlike most revolutions, it was imposed top down.  
(Marcus Agius, former Barclays Bank Chairman)

With de-regulation came the marketisation of one sector after another and a war of attrition - the persistent privatisation of public services and the imposition of PFIs. Although in Scotland, we have not taken the full medicine – we have hung onto our NHS with more determination the relentless push goes on. The outsourcing of public services, for example, has led to a huge growth of corporate power – private, unaccountable power. On the other side of this balance sheet we have seen the growth of casualised labour, the reduction of wages, working conditions and job security, and ‘zero hours’ contracts.

### **The new language**

The imposition of this business model has not only changed structures and relationships but, more insidiously, changed the language by which we now think and talk about public services. When the business language of ‘products’ and ‘customers’ spilled over into the community sector, those who challenged its use were seen as old fashioned or hampering the new ‘efficiency’.

These subtle shifts in the common determination of meanings – through everyday communication shape and influence popular opinion and gradually the whole market ideology begins to become normal. The creation of this ‘common sense’, everyday

form of thinking always contains a certain pragmatic logic. It is difficult to argue, for example, against being more 'efficient' with limited public resources.

Many of us made attempts to be subversive and continue the old but disguising it in the new 'business speak', but very slowly we find we have woken up and it is everywhere. And this is the most insidious aspect of this rotten war: it forces decent ordinary people to act in ways which support the whole onslaught. We are trained and made to think of our clients, passengers, patients or students as 'consumers'. Managers of community projects or voluntary organisations find themselves fitting their objectives into business language - so that what starts off as frustrating and alien becomes the norm, and most of us become unwittingly, or unwillingly, complicit in this take-over.

### **Unaccountable power**

The other disturbing effect is that as a result of the growth of global corporations and private equity companies, of market traders and investment bankers, there are an increasing number of extremely wealthy people who have immense power - the 'super rich' (Peston 2007)

Jim Ratcliffe is one of the richest people in the UK and owner of the private equity company INEOS which controls the Grangemouth petrochemical plant. In 2010 he asked the government to defer his VAT re-payment for a year. When they refused, he immediately moved his staff, company headquarters and tax residence to Switzerland, saving him a tax bill of £380 million that should have gone into UK tax revenues. In October 2013 he hit the news with his allegation that the trade union Unite was affecting his business through their efforts to maintain wage levels and working conditions and he urged the government to cut the rate of corporation tax for manufacturing companies. His heavy-handed tactics produced the result that was wanted: changes to his employees' terms and conditions such as ending their final salary pension scheme, freezing pay and bonuses, and reducing shift allowances.

This drive for low wages has been increasingly subsidised by governments, whether Labour, Tory or the current Lib Dem/Tory coalition. It is often forgotten that half of those on benefits are the *working* poor who need to claim benefits because their employers do not provide a living wage. Work is no route out of poverty (Shildrick 2013).

These wealthy people and their huge corporations have unseemly power, many of them with privileged, direct access to government ministers through the business 'buddy scheme'. The perverted logic of the market means that the rich get richer, the tax havens multiply and the tax base of the country is continually eroded - reducing the amount of money available for schools and hospitals - those things we apparently cannot afford.

So we have an out-of-touch, super-rich group of people, who live on another planet, rampaging like global Barbarians, draining the tax base of countries, threatening governments that if they don't get what they want, they will 'pull out', with their fingers on the button of more drone attacks, 'refusing to pay the price of belonging in any meaningful sense to any nation or community - except the global community of the super rich' (Peston 2007). Is this a time of 'austerity', or a time of profligacy and arrogance?

### **Welfare 'reforms' and austerity cuts**

When this rotten system begins to implode, who has to take the 'austerity cuts'? Those who are the most vulnerable in our society; those who have the least power and resources to resist; those on incapacity benefits, or the unemployed. They are not only obliged to take the brunt of the policies, they also have to take the vilification of government ministers and the media.

The ways in which areas of council housing have become stigmatized as 'benefit streets', where the 'problem' categories of society are seen to collect, show how stigma becomes activated for political capital (Tyler 2013, Slater 2013). Iain Duncan

Smith recently described ‘the twilight world of Britain’s welfare ghettos [where people are] languishing on welfare with no incentive to aspire for a better life’.

The language of ‘welfare scroungers’ and ‘skivers’ is deliberate and nasty. This cultural violence works to ‘change the moral colour of an act from red/wrong to green/right or to yellow/acceptable’, moving and hardening public opinion in the process of devaluing, stigmatising and blaming particular groups.(Galtung 1990)

This socio-structural violence against the poor is a war causing deaths, early deaths, illness, and suicides (Jones & McCormack forthcoming). Two public health experts, drawing from international data and historical statistics, have concluded that government policy to support or reduce resources to lower income groups becomes a matter of life and death during financial crises, ‘The UK is one of the clearest expressions of how austerity kills’. (Stuckler & Sanjay 2013)

Understanding who is responsible for this misery is the first step in seriously resisting this onslaught - and we need to be serious about it, not overwhelmed.

It is not some huge inevitable economic disturbance; it is not people with a bedroom for their carer or their dialysis unit; it is not ‘welfare scroungers’. The challenge has to be directed to the tax avoidance of corporations; the out-of-control investment bankers and private equity companies; and governments who promote policies which create huge inequalities in our society. Inequalities affect mortality and morbidity, the level of violence in our communities, and our happiness. The most serious outcome, however, is the way that growing inequality has pulled us apart, as a people, creating such a gulf between us that our common bonds are being broken (Wilkinson and Pickett 2009). Moreover, those of us who are better off are acting as a huge complacent ‘buffer’ that muffles the sound of this war and its misery.

The big picture is grim. What ‘resources of hope’ (Williams 1989) can we identify for these difficult times?

**Iceland and the banking crisis**

One inspiring example of making a stand against this onslaught lies in a small country just outside the Arctic Circle. Faced with the worst banking crisis in history in 2008, Iceland refused to bail out the banks when they went bust and instead chose to protect its entire population from the worst effects of the crisis. The more intriguing details of this were not to be found in the mainstream media which concentrated on the ‘plucky country’ story or the concerns of local authorities who had put their money in the Icesave bank. In an interview with DemocracyNow!, a social media news site, Birgitta Jonsdottir, a radical Icelandic MP told a different story<sup>1</sup>.

The collapse of the Icelandic banks led to pressure from the UK and Dutch governments who had bailed out their own citizens and wanted to recoup this money. Threatening noises were made about Iceland’s application for an IMF loan and membership of the EU and Icelandic ministers felt they had no options but to accede to these demands. A secret memorandum began to be drawn up outlining the huge debt repayment programme they would be forced to pay – at levels which would have crippled the country and decimated public services.

However, two sources of information changed this situation dramatically. First, the details of the huge debt repayments in the memorandum were leaked by Bradley (now Ashely) Manning<sup>2</sup>. Secondly, actors from the city theatre in Reykjavik decided to disseminate the findings from a crucial report into the banking scandal by holding free, live, streamed public readings of it non-stop, day and night for six days.

Armed with this information, politicians and the public demanded a referendum in which 93% of the people rejected the terms of the agreement and refused to bail out the private banks. Emboldened by this strong mandate from the people, the president refused to enact the bills and had the confidence to let it be decided by the European Free Trade Association court, which eventually decreed that Iceland was not obliged

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<sup>1</sup> See interview by Amy Goodman on DemocracyNow! website

<sup>2</sup> the American soldier now serving a 35 year sentence for passing information to Wikileaks

to pay these debts. During the crisis, the government increased the level of the lowest wages and put more money into the social support services.

A funny thing happened on the way to economic Armageddon: Iceland's very desperation made conventional behaviour impossible, freeing the nation to break the rules. Where everyone else bailed out the bankers and made the public pay the price, Iceland let the banks go bust and actually expanded its social safety net. Where everyone else was fixated on trying to placate international investors, Iceland imposed temporary controls on the movement of capital to give itself room to manoeuvre. (Krugman 2013)

By 2011 unemployment fell back to below 5% and GDP growth was above 4% – far exceeding any of other European countries that suffered major recessions (Krugman 2012). Actions such as this offer hope and encouragement that it is possible to build a counter-hegemony against neo-liberalism, even for a small country.

### **Resources of hope and ideas for action**

The current referendum debate in Scotland provides a unique opportunity to reflect on this big picture – to re-imagine the kind of society that we want to live in and to re-think political and practical alternatives. The recent economic crisis has allowed the veil of neo-liberalism to slip and reveal its real face. I suggest that there is a whiff of something different in the air – the tectonic plates are rumbling and significant things surfacing. Three of these were evident in the Icelandic situation and are particularly crucial at this momentous time in our history. Iceland was able to take a stand and protect its people through freedom of information, a fierce defence of their 'commonweal', and strong democratic activity. It is to these I would now like to turn.

First of all, we have a digital communication revolution that has changed our whole relationship to **the control of information:**

This type of communication is horizontal, and it is networked. Spin and lies and inadvertent mistakes are easily challenged – and not just challenged but neutralised. (Mason 2012)

Social media and digital communication played a key role in the European protests and movements that sprang up after the financial crisis in 2008. They are also breaking the mainstream media's dominance over key debates and issues. In the Scottish referendum debate, for example, it is the alternative social media sites that are bringing the debate to life. Websites like Bella Caledonia, Wings over Scotland and Newsnet are attracting over half a million unique visits each month. Independent sites such as Democracy Now! UK Uncut and 38 degrees provide information, campaigning opportunities and new perspectives, presenting an unparalleled opportunity to connect in and hear other voices, not just those of the powerful.

Secondly, the war is destroying the common fabric of our social support systems - our welfare state, our collectivity, and our mutuality - **the 'commonweal'**. And why is this targeted? Because it represents our mutual strength.

What is surfacing is a move to protect this - to articulate what we cherish and what we value in Scotland and to re-state our belief in the commonweal. Nye Bevan, the architect of the NHS, described it as 'an act of collective goodwill' – a concrete expression of the crucial idea that we can build and shape our society on the principle of the common good. Its living embodiment in bricks and mortar, in institutions and services, affirms on a daily basis our collective commitment and our common humanity. It connects us rather than divides us; within the commonweal, we are all equal. Collective goodwill evokes the best in us and at heart it is about a common kindness. I contend that it is only by drawing from these strong collective structures and values that we can begin to resist the logic of the market. These ideas might sound soft and fluffy pitted against the grim reality of the neo-liberal war but, like the silk strands in a spider's web, they are tougher than steel and able to absorb immense pressure under stress.



It is no surprise to me that the idea of the ‘commonweal’ is surfacing and finding a resonance across the country at this time.<sup>3</sup> These progressive ideas are the beginning of a counter-hegemony that is starting to bubble up from the grassroots.

In many parts of Europe it is significant that after the street protests and occupations against the financial crisis people are organising to re-configure their ‘commonweal’. The ‘Indignados’ movement in Spain and the people in Greece<sup>4</sup> who occupied the streets and squares during the economic crisis are now organising their own collective support networks in neighbourhoods across their countries (Postill 2014). In addition, they are experimenting with different kinds of democracy: assemblies, ‘consultas’, non-hierarchical structures, and consensus agreement. And this brings me to the third significant stream that is running at the moment.

Although this is an economic war, it is crucially **a crisis of democracy**. To examine alternative economies, to strengthen the commonweal, to rein in the big corporations, we need an active politics and strong courageous politicians. We have allowed an unhealthy gap to emerge so that their natural connections are with corporate power, not with people power.<sup>5</sup>

Years of consumerism have encouraged many of us to believe that we can ‘get what we want, when we want it’ and dented our ability to think collectively. People turn up to meetings and shout their piece, or answer a survey, and then they think ‘Right, that’s it...they should do what I want .... and if they don’t, they (the politicians) are all a bunch of wasters’. We have to re-train ourselves to act as citizens in this process - not individual consumers whose whims are to be satisfied. A more mature politics is required – a deliberative, discursive, participatory democracy that strengthens and ties our representatives closely to us – so that ‘they’ become ‘us’.

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<sup>3</sup> See for example the Jimmy Reid Foundation ‘Commonweal’ project <http://scottishcommonweal.org/> and <http://www.scottishcommons.org>

<sup>4</sup> <http://omikronproject.gr/>

<sup>5</sup> See article in *Guardian* 18<sup>th</sup> Jan 2013

What is exciting at the moment is that over and above party politics and the formal campaigns there is a flourishing of groups in Scotland who have started this move to a discursive and public democracy using social media to connect and communicate. The Radical Independence Campaign, for example, attracted over 1000 delegates to their 2013 conference. Changin' Scotland, So Say Scotland, Demo Max, The National Collective of Artists and Writers are all alive and kicking.

This stream of political and cultural activity is part of the 'subterranean' protests that have sprung up across Europe.

It is one of those rare moments in history when subterranean politics 'bubbles up' to the surface. ...These public displays are about a profound re-imagining of politics and democracy. But what is special about subterranean politics in 2011 and 2012 is their 'resonance', the way that they strike a chord in main-stream public opinion. (Kaldor 2012)

Adult educators have a crucial and exciting role to play in supporting freedom of information, encouraging communities to engage with this new politics and in the protection of the commonweal. Providing public space for debates, discussions and critical dialogue in 2014, whatever the outcome of the referendum, will enliven participatory democracy and begin to build a strong bulwark against this neo-liberal war.

It is only in the shared belief and insistence that there are practical alternatives that the balance of forces and chances begins to alter. Once the inevitabilities are challenged, we begin gathering our resources for a journey of hope. (Williams 1989)

(This is a shortened version of the Stephen Maxwell Memorial Lecture delivered in Edinburgh in November 2013. See also the review of Stephen Maxwell's *The Case for Left-Wing Nationalism* by John Player in this issue.)

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