

DIARY OF A CANDIDATE

Chris Harvie

I ELECTION REFLECTIONS, 20 FEBRUARY TO 13 MARCH

The Scottish elections will happen almost exactly three hundred years after the Union, and a decade after the election of New Labour. Would one have expected the present vertiginous situation in 1997? The politics of hope have weathered into dismay, and latterly into disgust. Blair may be dead meat, but he's twitching to a current which doesn't seem to animate Brown. This candidate's diary, more of a commonplace book, was undertaken for **Scottish Affairs**. I decided to do it thematically, in roughly three-week stints, and then send it directly to the editor. This way it would appear raw, and not doctored to give a logical historical sequence where this did not exist.

En route: England observed

The candidature proposition, undertaken from November 2006, was itself difficult. I had to wind down my teaching in Germany, finish various publishing projects, appear in Kirkcaldy for roughly a week each month, look after my elderly parents in Melrose, and land punches on Gordon Brown.

This meant physically coping with the increasing mess that is British transport. Theoretically, in the train versus plane battle, the former ought to be well

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ahead. The carbon-rich plane trip from London to Scotland is chopped up into brief and unproductive sections, while the train is well equipped for computers and on GNER there's WiFi access. But there are incessant delays at weekends. In March the West Coast line was knocked out for weeks by the Greyrigg derailment and the Scots were hit by the RMT signalmen's strike, steered by the less-than-sympathetic Bob Crow. People paying Europe's highest rail fares were being forced to go long stretches by bus.

I prefaced a talk I gave on 6 March at the Chartered Institute of Transport in Edinburgh with a quote from Philip Larkin's 'The Whitsun Weddings' a poem exactly fifty years old:

... Free at last
And loaded with the sum of what they saw,
We hurried towards London, shuffling gout of steam.
Now fields were building-plots, and poplars cast
Long shadows over major roads, and for
Some fifty minutes, that in time would seem
Long enough to settle hats and say
I nearly died,
A dozen marriages got under way.

Heartening then and consequently sad in retrospect: the Hull-King's Cross rail journey as an epitome of 'celebrating union: may it remain.' Seen from the GNER train the English east midland landscape doesn't look prepossessing. The new housing is thin and fragile: close-packed, bogus-traditional: much of it parked precariously close to rivers. On the town fringes sprawl derelict factories or vast slabs of warehouses and supermarkets devoid of design or grace. If the place is prospering, why the shabbiness, the grungy trainers-and-baseball-cap look? Vast articulated trucks – often unmarked – bowl along the motorways. Out-of-proportion SUVs squat in the streets. Were it not for the prospect of Scottish independence I would not be tempted to return from Germany: certainly not to England south of the Humber.

Yet, as the Manchester man retorted to Friedrich Engels, 'a great deal of money is made here, sir!'

Kirkcaldy

I try to get up to Kirkcaldy about once a fortnight, but the frequency is increasing. I am aided by age. German senior cits get cheapo first-class

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runabouts, which give me the WiFi on the trains. ‘The railway carriage is my office’ as Anthony Trollope put it. He would have loved having ‘telegrams and anger’ constantly on call. North of Edinburgh, the speed falls by over a third. The coastal line from the Forth Bridge is no faster than it was in 1890, though its land- and seascape is as romantic as the Rhine.

Kirkcaldy esplanade is the one hugely jarring note: a small motorway severs town and strand. The rears of several big stores loom over it like elephants’ backsides. With a cluster of megamalls – ‘TescoLand’ – inland on the John Smith Trading Estate, it’s quiet and at either end semi-derelict. We leaflet in the High Street every Saturday and seem to get a pretty good reception; no sign so far of any Labour people, although Marilyn Livingstone MSP is rarely off the photo pages of the **Fife Free Press**. Is this because we’re SNP and doing well in the polls, or the courtesy of the provinces?

Ian Chisholm, my agent, and I scour the place in search of (a) a cheap party headquarters and (b) a port for a cross-Forth express ferry. There are plenty of empty properties near the old harbour, which I remember as pretty busy in the 1970s. The last cargo boat docked in 1999, and now much of the place is covered with rather twee blocks of flats. Forth Ports are property developers to whom navigation is a residual bore. So there’s a bit of worry that better communications might actually hurt the Fife towns – folk heading to Edinburgh to shop, eat, drink, see shows – unless accompanied by an entrepreneurial renaissance at home.

I am making much of the ferry project, to be undertaken experimentally by Stagecoach, using a hovercraft between Kirkcaldy West beach and Portobello, in June, and we see a bit of Alistair MacLeod, Brian Souter’s consultant: meat and drink to Ian, who’s a ‘semi-retired’ marine engineer, specialising in software for steering systems, weather forecasting, etc. His mobile is always going off, followed by conversations only one word in twenty of which I understand – not just because he’s from Hawick! These concern the freighters bobbing offshore, up to a dozen a day. Twenty years ago some would have been built at Leith or Uncle Alex’s yard at Grangemouth. Maybe one or two are still afloat. The same, alas, goes for Ian’s sort of artisan-entrepreneur: caught between TescoLand and the People’s Republic.

The media and Scotland

I hadn’t realised before that Fife is the province of the **Courier**, which has a well-staffed office in Kirkcaldy for its local edition. Edinburgh, visible from

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practically every street, is far less significant, journalistically, than Dundee, forty miles away. With their big local circulation the **Courier** and **Press and Journal** are very like German regionals, while the **Herald** and the **Scotsman** seem rather anomalous. I suspect that it may be the disjunction between regionality and Scottishness, rather than qualitative values, that gives the English papers their current way in. The **Scotsman** isn't a regional in the sense that the **Courier** is, and into this gap the **Mail** inserts itself with its 'lifestyle' gloop. The **Herald** and the **Scotsman** seem anorexic in contrast with their German equivalents, the **Frankfurter Rundschau** or **Süddeutsche Zeitung**, increasingly bulked-out with PR handouts and with a nominal investigative content. The **Record** seems to have given up, but there is mysteriously little emanating from NewsInt. It's probably too late to expect change, but never underestimate the Prince of Darkness's capacity for mayhem.

Media is, significantly, the great 'non-devolved' subject. Ofcom was centralised in London, convenient for the production companies which have swallowed Wark Clements, the publisher-agent-bookshed triangle with their multimedia tie-ins, and the growing and prospering ranks of media lawyers. For this lot, said David Stenhouse of the BBC, Scotland is a yawn.

The result of this meditation was perturbing. I had been trying to sell an analysis of Brown's economics but it was obvious that there was no market for this sort of thing, beyond celeb biography (Whitehall gossip) on one hand, and the sort of fanzine stuff produced by Politico's on the other. My 'commentisfree' blog in the **Guardian** seemed to be the only one much concerned with Scotland. This attracted predictable heckling from the blogmob, but didn't put me off. It seemed, however, another instance of a technical innovation, supposed to enhance variety, strengthening the centre by flattering its myopia and tactlessness.

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Interesting times in Kirkcaldy and Scotland. As far as one can judge (and participants are always blinkered) the Labour campaign in the Chancellor's own constituency is falling apart, and with it the career of Gordon Brown and maybe the future of the UK.

All of this is a strange blend of the personal, the comic, and the cosmic. It's happening to people from one's own past – I was close to Gordon a quarter-century ago when he was Scottish Labour's coming man, and we wrote a pamphlet together **The Scottish Assembly and Why You Must Vote for It**.

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Scotland was neither shaken nor stirred. But Scottish elections score high in black farce, from John Galt's pioneering **The Provost** of 1822 to Eric Linklater, as a callow Nationalist pratfalling over Fife East in the 1930s, in his **Magnus Merriman** (1934). John Buchan, bard of empire, was son of the minister of Dysart, and Scotland's renaissance man Hugh MacDiarmid, whose slogan was so bold no-one could use it – 'Honour yourself: Vote Communist!' – appears in **Merriman**. MacDiarmid would have loved the current clamjamfrae. There are Communist councillors yet in the 'Little Moscows' of next-door Central Fife, where coal is still won from opencast.

This is a literary Kingdom, as its best-known author Ian Rankin, creator of Inspector Rebus, always reminds us. Iain Banks is Chancellor Brown's North Queensferry neighbour, Ian Jack, Editor of **Granta**, was born in Inverkeithing, Tom Nairn at Freuchie. The poets Douglas Dunn, John Burnside and Robert Crawford teach at St Andrews. Chris Smout, *doyen* of Scots historians, lives at Anstruther. With two writer-filmmakers, Christopher Hope and Tim Neat, the poet, publisher and MacDiarmid biographer Duncan Glen, Tom Hubbard, founder-librarian of the Scots Poetry Library and wandering scholar (last year Hungary, this year Ireland) a good bookshop with anarchist leanings – Midnight Oil – at Kirkcaldy, we are well served for literary polymaths.

When I was adopted for the Lang Toun, the local party's convenor, George Kay, said I was the first Professor the Scottish National Party had fielded. 'No he's not!' came from the back of the room. 94-year old Douglas Kerr had supported the Greek scholar Douglas Young, who nearly won in 1944, and went on to translate Aristophanes' **The Frogs** into broad Scots as **The Puddocks**, in a memorably messy and anarchic Edinburgh Fringe production, involving boats, dams and lakes, and an ancient royal theatre.

The Brown tragedy – and for all his mistakes and arrogance, it is a tragedy – is equally literary; out of Stevenson or Hardy. He could be the diligent Henry Durie in **The Master of Ballantrae**, the Job-like Michael Henchard in **The Mayor of Casterbridge**. Some Westminster accounts by aggrieved parties suggest a more brutal local anti-hero in George Douglas Brown's **The House with the Green Shutters**. John Gourlay, carter of 'Barbie' in Ayrshire, ruled the roost until the railways came, whereupon his helots rose up and destroyed him. The parallel here is the chorus of 'the bodies' – the local worthies: schoolteacher, town clerk, minister – who first squirm and defer, and then crow over his fall. Scotland remains richer in 'commentators' than in political actors.

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The Fife coast is dramatic, soaked in history, and in the wonderful spring weather everything grabs significance to itself. The Wemyss villages twinkle their way out to the East Neuk, looking almost Mediterranean at a distance (and with recent restoration, equally good close up). Out on the Forth lie the Bass Rock and the distant Lammermuirs – ‘Ding doon Tantallon, build a brig to the Bass!’ was medieval Scots for mission impossible. From the cliffs and steep fields above Kinghorn you can see the daily procession of ships up and down the Forth, like the Breughel picture in Auden’s ‘Musée des Beaux Arts’ where Icarus slips, near-unnoticed by ploughman and captain, to join Sir Patrick Spens:

Half-ower, half-ower from Aberdour,
'Tis fifty fathoms deep,
And there lies bold Sir Patrick Spens,
Wi' the Scots lords at his feet.

There is a link here to the tides of Anglo-Scots relations. Spens was sent to Norway to bring the heiress to the Scots throne back, an echo of the dynastic crisis of 1286, after King Alexander III was killed in a fall at Kinghorn. Until then there had been, not Mel Gibson’s fictional oppression in **Braveheart**, but a union of sorts, with peace and some affluence: Scottish kings swearing fealty to the Plantagenets, and Scottish nobles holding English estates. On the monument to Alexander on the Kinghorn cliffs is the first poem in Lallans:

When Alexander our king was deid,
Who Scotland led in laugh an' lie,
Away was sonst of yill an' breid,
Of wine and wax, of gamyn and of glee.
Our gold was turnèd into lead.
O Christ conceivit in virginitie,
Succour Scotland and remeid,
That is steyed in perplexitie.

Edward I used the chance to subjugate the Scots as he had the Welsh, and started the series of invasions (countered by national rebellions and threats to his own finances) which provoked the Auld Alliance between Scotland and France and dire relations with England until the reformation in 1560. Its master work, the King James Bible, was begun in 1601 in Burntisland’s new Calvinist kirk.

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Such tendencies – drifts towards union, followed by recoil from it – have marked subsequent centuries. The parliamentary union of 1707 was a tactful compromise, not a takeover. Aristos, kirk, law, burghs and universities patrolled the place and oiled the engine of patronage. After the Kirk split in 1843 – the author of this, Thomas Chalmers, was a Fifer – much authority went south, some of it recouped by administrative devolution in the 1880s and the expansion of the Scottish Office under Walter Elliot and Tom Johnston, two brilliant ‘administrative patriots’ between 1935 and 1945. The Scots are rather good, in fact, at unions: the Romans called them the *Foederati*, or ‘treaty people’. Professor James Lorimer, laird of Kellie Castle, inland from St Monans, drafted the first scheme for a federal Europe, in 1884.

The 1997-8 legislative devolution formally reserved macroeconomics, defence, foreign affairs and media to London, only for New Labour to go for broke on most of them. This exaggerated Westminster’s capacity to influence things really reserved to the City, the Pentagon, Brussels, and Rupert Murdoch, and these have whipped the unfortunate Brown into line.

I am doing an old-fashioned doorstep canvass and being well-received in neat well-kept streets. The Langtonians are never less than courteous, and often stimulating, like the 96-year-old lady who suggested that her engineer grandfather’s plan for the town’s desolate seafront – ‘build a breakwater out from either side of the bay, with promenades and pleasure domes on it’ – might still work. Indeed it might. The local Imam, scunnered with Labour over Iraq, says he might put a word in for us in Dubai.

The view from Kirkcaldy’s railway station is pastoral. Thirty years ago it was of cliff-like factory walls. But all but one each of the linoleum works and maltings which once marked the place have closed, leaving spectacular ruins or holes in the ground; and much human wreckage. Growth is only a third that of Edinburgh, only five miles away. With Scotland’s drug problem three times that of Germany, wraiths haunt run-down cul-de-sacs, with rubbish heaped on the gardens, doors are edged open by tattooed young musclemen with big dogs, big cars and dead eyes: ‘Ah want naethin’ tae dae wi’ youse.’ Drifting knots of fourteen- or fifteen-year-olds, in tatty street-gear, make pests of themselves, hanging round fast food joints, drinking ‘Buckie’ (Buckfast) laying waste bus shelters and fences, etc. Sure, annoying adults is a teenage speciality, but the problem of the Kirkcaldy kids is that their legal, responsible future is one of dead-end, unskilled, badly-paid jobs in supermarkets or call-centres.

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Methil, just to the east of the constituency, has a dead coal-port, dead rig-building yard, dead power-station. Saddest of all are its massive dead Co-operative stores, once the measure of the miners' gains.

But they are starting to build wind-turbines. Whatever happens nationally on 3 May, Proportional Representation will end the era of the 'People's Republics' among the local authorities, and I hope start a devolution of power to the communities. I have had some success with a call to 'turn the Forth inside out' and think of it as a highway not a barrier. And in Fife, where the great Patrick Geddes undertook his first town planning schemes in the 1890s, there's plenty of scope for a linear city – a necklace of villages, burghs, industrial estates and ports, strung along rail, road and water links – running from Stirling to Levenmouth.

From June there will be an experimental hovercraft service across the Forth to and from Edinburgh. In the Lang Toun we have from Wednesday 18 May a week of the Links Fair, Europe's biggest street-fest, they say. Let joy be unconfined! Let there be drinking in the bars, necking in the parlours, and dancing in the streets! Thank you Groucho Marx.

All of this is being observed, goggle-eyed, by our local symbols, the daft china cats and pigs of Wemyss Ware. These were invented by Karel Nekola, a Pole, in the 1880s. His kinsfolk are now electors. Never forget that!

III PERSUADING A NAKED EMPEROR TO CLEAR OFF

Should Scotland vote as we hope on 3 May, the small boy will not only have pointed out that the Emperor is naked but have told him to get out of town. Are we dealing with a 'Failed State?' Not yet, and we don't want to be. Always allow an opponent a line of retreat, ran the old adage. We don't want to negotiate with a nervous wreck.

Anglo-Britain has become increasingly incoherent because the international financial disorder that breeds failed states has colonised the United Kingdom of London, aided by Chancellor Brown as economic innocent. Brown continually alludes to Adam Smith, but Smith's more realistic disciple Robert Burns is cleverer on his problems: 'An' forward, tho' I cannot see/ I guess and fear.' In this context independence will come swifter if we soothe rather than provoke.

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To start with the most intractable problem: Nicholas Stern's report on Climate Change, looming over the future, dramatised New Labour's failures on transport and the environment. The 2006 carousel VAT frauds, big enough to imperil the credit of the UK state, showed that local hoods, using economic mechanisms for amoral ends, could evade economic and judicial regulation because 'legitimate' finance bent law and government to its own purposes: see the banks' credit card and payment protection insurance scams. For all his triumphal rhetoric, Brown wasn't master in his house.

Financial services – Smith's 'conspiracies of merchants'? – attracted cash to London *because* Brown's policeman state was thin on policemen. Much of the 'able criminality' that resulted found no place in the economics or administration textbooks because any oversight by Walter Bagehot's 'efficient' Cabinet government was dimmed after the Granita compact in 1994 divided

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represents, servicing large and increasingly foreign-owned corporations which both centralise and atomise. In Ulster sovereign power has become tangled up with sectarianism and gangsterism. If Whitehall can't solve the United Kingdom's biggest bank robbery what chance does it have against the carousel men?

We are dealing with a fragile political system, faced with the crumbling of the last of its great power pretensions. To handle it, we're going to have to become premature diplomats, extending links to Europe and to Ireland, encouraging the English to become politically engaged, enterprising, generous: willing to stand up to the controllers of their wealth. We won't do this by sharing New Labour's fantasies, tolerating the economy of illegalism, seeping upwards from the drugs trade, the trafficking in arms and recycling of income scammed from the Middle East, Africa and Russia.

Lacking the driver of an industrial economy, in which social capital and its foes pretty soon become apparent, London-based cultural capitalism has perched on the wedding cake of the City's billions. In the media an irresponsible post-modern irony has tolerated the tenfold growth of advisers and spin doctors in Whitehall. A 'cultural' private sector to do with marketing, not quality, has paid for this by selling out to foreign investors, who now control about 80% of publishing, and increasing swathes of the electronic media.

The sustainability of this 'system', in orthodox economic terms or Stern's environmental ones, hasn't been touched on, but the reckoning will have to figure in any negotiations. A lot will have to go, or be put down on the table: the 2012 Olympics, foreign policy, Trident, new nuclear power stations, the future of the BBC. With the oil to hand, and almost certainly increasing in price, the EU will obviously be at the negotiating table, and matters like the UK's public and private debt, and European rail and sea routes, will be on the agenda. Alliances will vary, and some may be unusual. Good fences make good neighbours, but so do good links.

IV 'CLUNKIN' BROON'

There's an old political curse that goes 'O that my enemy would write a book!'

That's my text. And my enemy is Gordon Brown. It's not really Jack McConnell.

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Because Jack is minor league stuff. Bart Simpson, not C. Montgomery Burns. Though Bart does the business. In fact, if you think Bart's behaving badly, you have Jack: a man for whom the word 'furtive' could have been coined. 'Doing less, better'. Where have we seen that before? 'Underachiever, and proud of it!' Jack's been to Springfield, and got the T-shirt. And that's enough Jack. He doesn't do books.

Scotland has woken up Big G. El fisto molto clunko is riding into town. And Gordon has written book after book. **The Red Paper, The Real Divide, Maxton**, and most recently **Moving Britain Forward**, in which lots of celebs say how wonderful he is. **Harry Potter and the Great Clunking Fist?**

We are supposed to be terrified by it. We're supposed to be terrified by *Douglas Alexander*, for God's sake. But what is Gordon's net achievement.? There's one book he doesn't mention much. **Where there is Greed**, written in 1989. A pity, because it's a good book. I could agree with 90% of it. Why has he forgotten about it?

Industrial Broon

Let me look at industry, society, the wider world. Then we can maybe see why Gordon is no longer flavour of the month.

Growth: New Labour claims on growth, employment and welfare look good in gross terms, but are they borne out when examined in detail? What happens when we differentiate between social and unsocial capital? Investment in health compared to investment in drink and gambling? When we compare the UK record with other European economies? With the recovery of German industry (described as 'stellar' by the head of the British Chambers of Commerce in 2006) the UK's industrial prospects are looking grim in the extreme. So, what happened to: Manufacture or die!

The man actually said that in 1989. Now we're told we live by not manufacturing. It collapsed from 21% to 15% of GDP, 1997-2004, and its control has largely shifted abroad. Will Hutton's 'stakeholder capitalism' – remember that? – was the only game in town, but Brown ignored it. Forget sophisticated new technologies but encourage 'conglomerates' (to use City-speak, meaning something disorganised) of outfits based on property speculation, retailing, and the increasing, irresponsible autonomy of international finance capital.

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Mobility. John Stuart Mill said that if a nation didn't have control of transport it wouldn't be a nation for long. In **Greed** Gordon said something similar. Last weekend the fastest train to Glasgow from London took seven hours – 54 miles an hour, slower than in the days of steam. The French had the impudence to run their new Paris-Strasbourg TGV at 350 miles an hour. In transport 'Gordon's Thing' Brown has scarcely attempted to check the deadly progress of high-carbon mobility. The 'real' cost of motoring and flying has, in cash terms, gone down. The 'carbon footprint' has swelled. He has wrecked attempts to devise a rational basis for transport costing. Because of his obsession with fiscal presentation, which pushes awkward capital investment items off the balance sheet. And because his conflict with Blair has ground John Prescott's environment empire to nothing.

Towns. We've had property speculators doing cosmetic urban reconstruction, backed up by lots of PR and 'partnerships' with government. But without powerful local authorities and effective planning, this can't cope both with the misery of the stubborn 'submerged third' of the socially excluded (as bad in London as anywhere else).

Sprawl. This is a major driver of the US economy. It means that much of what Jeremy Rifkind had feared in his **Age of Access** has come about: the enterprises which could have reinforced urban life have cleared off to the asocial, privatised world of the megamalls. Brown's neglect of essential but expensive infrastructure – water supply, flood control and sewage, recycling – has long-term implications which promise, in comparison with continental practice, catastrophe.

Brown: the successor to Beveridge and Keynes? Or is what's in control really 'turbocapitalism' embodied in a City of London no longer reckoned as really part of Britain. Its increasing wealth (with CEO incomes between 3 and 10 times those of cabinet ministers) hasn't anything in common with Carnegie or Soros. Brown is running a mega-microstate. The intelligence networks of the rich know an ill-regulated economy when they see one. Some geld has stuck to the City's shovels, most sloshes from the wealthy to the wealthy, paying Brown as little tax as it can. The Chancellor fondly hoped wealth would behave itself. 'Giving' in the USA is ten times greater than in the UK. But with every boom and slump the wealthy want more and more commercial raids, huge bonuses and exit to the sybaritic and completely uncivic world of golf, villas and yachts.

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Gordon the reformer

This is all supply-side stuff, but what about the other Gordon? The silent, stealthy, social reformer? Have the life chances of the poorest got better? Instead, inequality in Britain is running at record levels. Has wealth trickled down, like Adam Smith thought it would? No, it has pissed off to the tax havens.

We have 'low' unemployment – but a European record for 'sickies' (count them in and we're actually no better). The part-time section of our workforce is 60% larger than in Germany. This fits a level of child poverty which is 150% greater, and has been lashed by UNICEF as the worst in Europe.

Education? We did well, and the Germans did disastrously, in the OECD's PISA study in 2000. Wait a bit ... The English and Welsh submission was later found to have been rigged to leave out problematic pupils. It hasn't so far been repeated.

What happened to the Chancellor's own education initiatives? Individual learning accounts, anyone? Losses through fraud running into tens of millions. The University for Industry? Given up.

Asboland: In place of education there is 'illegalism' for the post-industrialised: a culture of social irresponsibility which is becoming downright criminality, not of the poor (too elderly, too unhealthy) but of a white-van-man mass culture which is parasitic both on the non-civic wealthy and on the excluded. The government goes on about the irresponsibility of the young, but what future does it offer them? Cold-calling, shelf-suffing, hamburger flipping. Being young is being insecure.

The effect of this on British society has been dire. The industrial firm, the academic and educationalists, the 'culture industries' have been weakened. The clever establishment which had tamed the 'creative chaos' of capitalism is no more. 'Best-seller' and 'life-style' values have carried away with them the real ethos of the Britishness Brown has been trying to revive. Beneath this, Scotland's deindustrialisation has produced through social breakdown and drugs an extreme social gulf. Though benefiting substantially from the North Sea oil that the Nationalists had claimed, the Chancellor's responses to this have been inept. Devolution didn't lead to federalism, but went utterly adrift.

Wider world

Behind this is also Brown's diplomatic-economic orientation of the UK – towards the USA, not towards Europe. There *is* a dynamic American radicalism but Brown hasn't bothered with it. His New Deal is only rhetoric. He has skated over the structural failures of the American way: its promotion of individual mobility at the cost of the environment, the way its winners can invoke Social Darwinism and as Christian fundamentalists try to get Darwin banned.

Above all, Brown's Cape Cod spectacles have distorted America's paradoxes: its powerful state in the military-industrial complex; its protectionism, and the European-mindedness of the US's own centre-left: J K Galbraith, Robert Putnam, Jeremy Rifkin.

Brown has blown his European chances. Britain's constitutional flexibility once seemed exactly what a rule-bound Europe needed. Deindustrialisation from Thatcher to Brown has made it irrelevant. But Europe has revenged itself: swallowed much of what's still valuable of our manufacturing and services.

Blair's involvement in Iraq, rejected by the great European powers apart from Berlusconi, has isolated the UK. Brown has made no attempt to reconcile with Europe, or to analyse his own responsibility for bankrolling this disaster.

The 'America or Europe' dilemma is miniaturised in Scotland, where the rival influences contend. The result of devolution has been a London-Scottie elite, with MSPs to do the local stuff, meddling in the south.

Summing up

This has been a negative view. But that's because it wants to put Brown's relentless negativity about Scotland's prospects into context.

In all of these major areas of British economy and society – in the statistics and on the ground – there are terrifying breakdowns. They were there when Brown was a young radical, they got worse under Thatcher, and worse again under New Labour. Think about recent history: think pensions, think PFI, think carousel VAT frauds. These run into scores of billions of pounds.

Disasters like the one facing Britain are ushered in, not through great causes and clashes, but through multiplying breakdowns. Collectively, these make the whole apparatus unmanageable. There's been since the 1960s a loss of

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authority to multinational bodies (whether globalised firms or the EU). Now under New Labour we've failed to adjust to an internal semi-federal state. We now have an environmental catastrophe looming up. Do they match it as a team? Or as individuals? As for the civic realm, this had been explicitly altered to stress the voter as customer, not as active, policy-forming citizen. The routes to a good civic life are blocked by a parasitic media, and a swollen PR establishment. Maybe a 'dynamic force', such as Lloyd George in World War I, or in a negative sense Thatcher, could have made a difference – or a grass-roots 'civic' movement of the sort that World War II had generated. But Blair and Brown haven't been up to the demands.

Why has this lasted so long? Brown has been the longest-serving Chancellor, even if people increasingly wonder why. Much can be explained by the deforming of politics and the economy. Meanwhile ballooning 'hot money' investment in the City of London and its satellites have made the Premier and Chancellor only bit players. Balance-of-payments deficits, bad enough, were supplemented by huge public and private indebtedness (a trillion smackeroos to the latter) even before turning to the 'off-balance-sheet' costs of Brown's PFI schemes. Why was this weakness not made public? Because our transnational media wants to keep things as they are.

The Chancellor has the delusion that he can regulate. Once regulation has been agreed on, and the correct boxes ticked, things will run fine. The mechanics of detailed intervention are beyond him, regarded as too European, in contrast to the well-broadcast certainties – in English – of the United States. Bluntly, many of New Labour's backers are allied to it for the good reason that other parties and other countries would throw the book at them. Big business realises that loose business controls, PFIs, patronage and tax privileges, kept it above water. Blair was either naïve enough or bent enough to take this into account: every man had his price. But Brown faces the scrutiny of his own people, and his kirk background will tell him what 'Mene, mene, tekel upharsin' means: 'Thou art weighed in the balance and found wanting.' And what happened next: 'And in that same night was Belshazzar the King slain, and his kingdom divided.'

Think about it, Gordon.

V THE START OF A NEW SONG – 1 MAY

Today is the 300th anniversary of the day the old Scots parliament died. ‘There’s ane end of an auld sang,’ as the Scots Lord Chancellor put it. Maybe not, if one reads the polls. Takes you back, though.

In fact, my present life has reverted to the 1960s, when I spent my summers on a Labour party canvassing team, along with my old friend-and-foe Robin Cook, whom I’m writing up for the **Dictionary of National Biography**. This is the best political training of all because you get an idea of what really concerns the voters, and you have to listen.

Only a few of the voters moan. Often they’re very kind even when they don’t agree with you. Sometimes they offer insights which would be difficult for you otherwise to grasp, like the boy in Birnam Road who said bluntly that I couldn’t do anything for him. He couldn’t get an apprenticeship, though his grades were good. His job in a call-centre was stressful, dull, and poorly paid. There was nothing for it but to join the army, which he’d done, though this would part him from a disabled relative whom he helped. He was able and articulate, and he was bitter.

There were folk in a lot of housing schemes angry at kids getting drunk and vandalising their street. ‘If you try to check them, they’ll make your life a misery.’ But they said there was little else for the kids to do, and even less for them to look forward to.

There were the shopkeepers faced with giant malls swallowing their customers – and dangerously dependent on ‘food miles’ and car-based shopping. See Joanna Blythman’s **Shopped** for this essential sort of economics, patently absent from Nobel Prize lists. I’ve lived in Europe for 25 years – in Tübingen we have four markets a week and nothing bigger than your average Lidl or Aldi – and I’ve seen nothing like TescoLand. It can’t be sustained.

There have been – in my own experience on the fringes of Scottish government – endless initiatives and task forces and Tsars for this that and the other. We have loads of what Kirkcaldy’s Adam Smith called ‘rental occupations’: exemplified by Scottish Enterprise and its GlobalScots and Friends of Scotland – collectively as useful as a chocolate teapot. Even so, few have clapped the rhetoric of First Minister McConnell. ‘Education not Separation’ has persistently been upstaged by the spectral duo of Blair and Brown. This exhibition of the ineducable has shortened the odds on an SNP victory.

Diary of a Candidate

Though the theme is important: a joined-up education, which has to reach across classes and ages. This goes back to the eleven years I worked at the Open University, founded by Jennie Lee from nearby Lochgelly, and my own approach has owed a lot to another Fifer, R F MacKenzie at Templehall School, Kirkcaldy in the 1950s, who criticised mechanistic comprehensives because they failed kids whose gifts were practical, not intellectual. I've had to use distance-learning techniques to cope with far-too-many students in Germany: and these can be developed back in Scotland, where Fife education stretches from proud St Andrews University to underfunded Adam Smith College. Education ought to be interchange as well as instruction – like the teenage girls on a local bus who did first-aid by the book on an old lady who collapsed – or in my Tübingen life the nineteen-year-old computer wizards who bail me out every week. We need to start with the practical and develop it: in first aid, in cooking, in computer competence. But this means an industry generating jobs that we, and not faceless speculators, control.

Gordon Brown has been bombarding the media with celebs of varying credibility backing the Union. What I hadn't expected occurred at a chat session at a local bookshop (Waterstone's? You must be joking: 'Midnight Oil' in Kirkcaldy's Commercial Street) at which political savant Tom Nairn, historian Christopher Smout, vocalist-social-theorist Pat Kane, journalist Rob Brown and novelist Allan Massie turned up to dissect the Union. Allan as Unionist scribe and I have been a feature of the Scottish discussion programme circuit long enough to be the Waldorf and Stadtler of this particular Muppet Show. What I hadn't expected was that he had written the editorial in the Scottish edition of the **Sunday Times** urging electors to vote for the SNP, on a day when the two main Scottish Sundays also came out in favour of the party. NewsInt is split on Scotland. Has the Prince of Darkness been told?

If Langtonians use a telescope they can almost see people in Leith, but their economy, and life-chances, are growing three times as fast as ours. This means more than simply improving the Forth crossings. This issue has in fact gone from a new road-bridge to a multi-modal submerged-tube tunnel, something which came out of an initiative from the village of South Queensferry. This motivated the retired Maintenance Director of Network Rail, John Carson, to promote the tunnel scheme as the hub of a high-speed rail network connecting Aberdeen and Dundee with the central belt. It convinced me. It should go ahead, and will be a positive legacy of the contest.

So there we are. And here I am, waiting rather impatiently for Catalan TV, as I have to canvas East Wemyss. Other clocks are ticking towards the opening of

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the polls in rather more than a day from now. Where do I go from here? I don't know. Kirkcaldy's at the edge of the SNP's possibilities, and in a four-party (at least) system, outcomes are difficult to predict. We guess and hope.