

COMMON WEAL



IS IT WELL?



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The folk of Scotland are probably weary by now of the need to explain that their pending choice reflects a political situation very different from that experienced at one time by, say, Ireland or Finland on the one hand, or that still pertaining in Lombardy or Bavaria, on the other. Whether ye be yea- or nay-sayers, that is, a proper and comprehensive understanding of your position demands, as seen elsewhere in this journal, a fairly rigorous form of special pleading. That's one reason why Robin McAlpine would surely agree in the description of his short text, *Common Weal* as anomalous. Indeed he puts the case for anomaly himself, in his opening sentence: 'Scotland's people are in a unique position...'

Common Weal, we are told in its prologue, is a synthesis of 'over 50 major policy reports by scores of authors on everything from tax and banking to arts and food to industry and work and democracy and land...'. There is an explicit striving, however, to avoid the sometimes daunting format of a 'policy report', and to make the publication accessible to citizens at large. None of the 'scores of authors' are ever mentioned by name in the body of the text, and it claims not only to use 'no language that could not be understood by any school leaver', but that it belongs 'almost in an oral tradition.' These are paradoxically big claims to make in terms of its pedigree and potential reach. But they also expose the truly anomalous nature of the publication – neither a book nor a folk tale evidently, it will discuss the polis in intricate detail in the language of one who has no political experience. This publication is anomalous, that is to say, not merely in its subject, but also in its own category, form and scope. If it is not exactly a policy report, then what is it? There are a number of headings under which we can examine that question.

Like the 1776 American Declaration of Independence, *Common Weal* asserts some fundamental rights and complaints of the people: a certain people within a definite national boundary. The American Declaration is however, made on behalf of the governing body, by prominent figures in that body (i.e. Jefferson with the help of Franklin and Adams). The Declaration was also made only after the sovereignty of that people in that national territory was ratified by a previous vote of the Congress. Robin McAlpine is neither a representative of the Scottish Government, nor does he even serve in the Scottish Parliament. There are, of course, many advantages which pertain to the case made for *Common Weal* as a grassroots phenomenon. We think here – for example – of the great influence of the writings of Thomas Paine – not only in America, but on working class movements on this side of the

Atlantic. But the point of the comparison with the 1776 Declaration is that McAlpine's work is written in advance of any formalisation of the sovereignty (Sept 18) of the very constituency on behalf of whom it dares to design. This makes it more difficult to envisage whose backing it could obtain, and how it could then exert influence.

Without an already specifically established, formalised and thus empowered sovereignty as subject of his political report, McAlpine's discourse can thus (at least until Sept 18) be seen in relation to the utopian tradition stretching from Plato, through Thomas More to Ebenezer Howard and beyond. McAlpine has specific practical aims and makes no attempt on the fundamental and universal philosophical scope of Plato's *Republic*. Nor does he pretend to sketch out, *tabula rasa*, an isolated discovered land where everything is new and can be imagined from ground zero as in the *Timaeus*, the *Critias*, or More's *Utopia*. That's not to say that there is no attempt whatsoever at poetry in the *Common Weal*. Plato's notion in the *Laws* and *Republic* that the sort of poetry and music made in society could influence the laws of the state has always been criticised by mundane and down-to-earth legislators. But did not Carlyle, for example, with his idiosyncratic and zealously biblical prose influence the tone and indeed the laws of his own civil society – and of other societies (-the Nazis alas!) on into the 20th century? McAlpine indeed seems at first bent on following something of Carlyle's style of poetic diction. He launches the book with the same neological hymning style of criticism: using emblematic forms to characterise the social and political enemy as 'Me First' (and also the approved alternative of 'All of Us First') where Carlyle had 'Mammon' as an equally instantly envisaged foe. Unfortunately McAlpine fails to keep up this original poetic impulse and after chapter one falls back into the more mundane format of the steady prose of the social scientist. This subsequent style has much more in common with Ebenezer Howard's *Garden Cities of Tomorrow* (1898) with its predictions and policies to remedy the comprehensive range of social occupational, residential, transport, ecological and political problems of modern living. Admittedly, McAlpine does have a much more sound grip of the financial realities of the capitalist economy than Howard – who was dependent on philanthropic Victorian 'gentlemen of probity and honour' to fund his own welfare schemes. One doesn't have to be an economist though, to recognise the centrality of McAlpine's own dependence on revitalising mid-20th century Keynesian policies for boosting the economy. The central tenet of Keynesianism that structural

imbalances in the economy can only be rectified by stimulating demand through public sector investment is everywhere in this manifesto. Yet equally, perhaps McAlpine's greatest weakness is his failure to reassure us that the over-centralisation of power which came with such policies in post-WWII Britain (in NHS, Welfare, and nationalised industries like coal, steel and railways) is not inevitable, and could somehow be avoided a next-time-around.

But there's a deeper, more atavistic cultural significance to be discerned in this invocation of the Common-Wealth which is denoted superficially by the insistence in the use of the old Scots term *Common Weal*. Inasmuch as this text constitutes a public confession of faith in the community, of the beliefs of a people set out from the rest, or in other words an elect –the Scots, it is a very recognisable Presbyterian trope. Here we see the notion of a common sense of public morality communicated in the form of a Jeremiad, a 'Have you seen what faithless Israel has done' type call back to the true path –in this case the path of a Keynesian public investment, mixed economy and social democratic politics. It is assumed somehow that this is the true moral equilibrium in which the contemporary Scottish polity must rest. Yet, as discussed above, while there is currently a recognisable Scottish people or nation, there is no agreed form of ultimate sovereignty or political body which can decide upon, legislate for or execute such a policy commitment. This effective obviation of an actual democratic civil forum in Macalpine's work has an unmistakably Old Testament flavour. Is it not, in fact, analogous in a paradoxical way to the position of some extreme 17th century Presbyterians, who, like the later Davie Deans in Scott's *Heart of Midlothian* (or, indeed like the current day Orthodox Jews who demonstrate against the State of Israel's claim that it speaks for all Judaism), hold civil government to be merely an interference with *jus divinum*? In these traditions – Presbyterian, Old Testament, Orthodox Jewish – the individual preacher can appeal to the conscience of the collective which he claims exists but which is not mediated by any civil political form. He can indeed claim to know and understand the essential forms and needs of this conscience, which he divines without need for recourse to the usual method of secular democratic expression.



The relation to tradition seems clear, if only formalistic, but admittedly it may be going too far to describe McAlpine as 'preaching'. Yet there is an earnestness in his tone which seems to strive for more authority to his word than any social or institutional status alone might warrant him. It is this moral earnestness that, as Kenneth Roy writes in the *Scottish Review* 'is not without satirical possibilities'. Roy pokes fun at McAlpine (*Scottish Review* 6/8/2014) by comparing the expression of his utopian 'vision' (this refers to McAlpine's article 'What Can be Done' published on the *Bella Caledonia* website 22/7/2014) to Newspeak. It's doubtless laudable to aim your prose at the level of those who have just completed their basic education in reading, writing and 'rithmetic. But what simple reader could encounter the earnest list of exhortatory apophthegms of McAlpine's first chapter – 'Shared interests create shared success'; 'Strength comes from balance'; 'All that matters is everything we do' and so on – without being prompted immediately to recollection of that other Orwellian calculation of pigs and their varying numbers of legs?

It's hard to believe that any serious post 20th century political thinker could be so insensitive to the problematic relationship between sloganising and the manifesto. If nonetheless *Common Weal* is read as a manifesto then that problem with a democratic deficit might not arise, as this document becomes a programme for action once democratic power has been obtained (on Sept 18). Even here though, the publication makes for an awkward misfit when we come to the question of what Carlyle termed 'Might and Right'. It's all very well to be 'right' on political economy, but if you don't have the political might to put your alternative economic programme into place then your analysis is, at best, just passed over. Throughout the 80s respected and influential economists like JK Galbraith, and connected journalists like William Keegan at The Observer published regular critiques demonstrating the folly of Thatcher's neo-liberal monetarist way. Sadly, without strong and coherent political organisation on their side (the Labour Party – Ha!) it made, and as yet has made no difference to the economic policy pursued by the British state. As a manifesto *Common Weal* has the obligatory paraphrases of Marx – for example on the relation between Welfare and taxation – 'given according to need, paid for according to ability'. But compared with Marx, whose own work was calculated to receive the backing of the growing communist movement, and the promotion from the International, and the pan-European revolutionaries of 1848, McAlpine seems like a voice crying out in the wilderness. In the article which Roy compares to Newspeak, McAlpine declares that he has the backing of no major political parties, and nor does he intend to set such a structure up himself:

Neither I nor anyone associated with either the Foundation or *Common Weal* has ever suggested that we become or start a political party.

The *Common Weal* project aims, he says, at becoming a government programme – presumably after the Yes vote on Sept 18 – but he seems to think it a virtue that he has no real plan to engage with party political structures to put this into action. McAlpine's project does nonetheless appear to have gained respect and sympathy of the burgeoning grassroots Independence movement. Beside his own website, he is published on the prominent campaigning Bella Caledonia site, and the *Common Weal* project had originally been developed with the backing of the Jimmy Reid Foundation, which latter receives much public sympathy even if it doesn't have massive popular political appeal. It is also unclear what support the *Common Weal* programme could obtain from

the Radical Independence Campaign (they promote *Common Weal* on their website), arguably the largest, most active and successful of the grassroots independence campaigners. As an essentially social democratic political and Keynesian economic programme - i.e. an attempt to stabilise and democratise the capitalist economy – it is doubtful though, if the *Common Weal* would have any serious and sustainable attraction for a group with a self-styled radical political agenda.

In many ways the publishing of this *Common Weal* text is both a product and a victim of that unique and frenetic position in which Scotland finds itself in 2014. It is a product of the intellectual, social and political fire which has been stoked up in the crucible of the nation's imagination as it ponders its future. But it is also a victim of the impetuous impulse to contribute ceaselessly, and to commit with gusto to definite positions with an immediacy which has been unleashed and encouraged by the format of a yes-or-no plebiscite. McAlpine's contribution, when he gets up to it, is discerning, enlightening and coherent. One can't help but feel, that despite the fact that the opportunity to engage with this debate has come only with Scotland's 'unique' position, McAlpine's critique of British public policy should be recommended reading for every citizen on both sides of the border, and on both sides of the referendum, whatever the result of the latter. The raising of such questions as Investment or speculation, revenue or capital, deficit or debt is done in a simple and straightforward manner which brings light for the non-specialist citizen where previously there has been nothing but obfuscation. These are the fundamental financial relations which structure all our personal, social and political lives, yet they have been wilfully obscured by decades of neo-liberal economic and policy management. It is in the light of this didactic and moral imperative that we understand that McAlpine opts for a simplified language – with 'no jargon, no bullet-points, no footnotes, no graphs and charts' etc. – in order to make the points quickly and easily comprehensible. The citizens need to know these things in order to make the right decisions, (especially after Sept 18), and :

Every citizen must face the fact that there is no-one coming to rescue us. It is up to us. A future built with our hands or a future built without us.

But nonetheless, is this simplification of the message not usually known as 'dumbing down'? What does it mean for your potential citizens' decision-making powers if you think the 'dumbed down' is the only language they will understand? It would be useful, in fact, to examine the sales figures, and the

demographic breakdown of readers of *Common Weal*. Just how broad a readership has it reached? And has the dumbing down affected the strength of its potential influence on conventional political structures? – will it be seen as the ‘Common Wealth for Scotch Dummies’? Needless to say, of the strength of *Common Weal*’s influence or otherwise we may have some intimation pretty soon. This reviewer’s fear is that the vital political and economic critique of contemporary public policy contained in this work may be dissipated and weakened in its effect because of poor editorial decisions. These poor decisions have been made in terms (as discussed fully above) of the presentation of the book, of the understanding and organisation of its scope (declaration, critique, utopian tract, or manifesto?), of target readership, of the relation of its critical impulse to political action, and of the marketing of the publication with respect to all the above.

One often hears from the yes-side that even if they lose the Referendum they have already won the political debate for Independence. That may well be so, but what does it signify? McAlpine writes knowledgably and incisively on housing, employment, economic, industrial, energy, and transport policy, and of others still, but perhaps he and his fellow yessers should have given more time and thought to editorial policy.

