

## An Attack on People with Learning Difficulties

I was one of the speakers at a meeting held in Glasgow, May 2013, in support of people with learning disabilities, some of which were severe. They and their families were defending themselves against Glasgow City Council's withdrawal of support for their day-centre, the very heart of their own community. This is a revised version of the talk I delivered back then in Ledgowan Hall, Summerston. It was never published. Some of it seems relevant. Our rage at the actions of the political and permanent state authorities is sometimes too much, and we are reduced to silence. Our contempt is so great that we could not speak to them if we met them in the street. Maybe we could heave a brick but talking would be hard, having to look them in the eye.

I remember appearing on a television show with the Labour Party's Leader of Glasgow Council in 1990-91. We were in the Green room before the show and were supposed to have our muffins and cups of tea, saying cheery hullo to one another. It serves the notion that 'politics' is a state of being and not really to do with the real world, the one where what we do has a direct effect on the lives of other people and may result, for example, in misery. It is assumed we can engage in small talk, chatting about future holidays and asking about each other's families until the programme researcher herds us along to the studio: on go the boxing gloves for a fight now staged by the state broadcasting services.

But this man I was to be with, the Leader of Glasgow's political cowardice and their lack of solidarity towards disabled people, no, no, I couldn't do it, I couldn't bring myself to shake his hand. The idea turned my stomach. And good that I saw it in him, that he knew I was not able to do it, that he had

seen my repugnance. It so happened he was the Leader of the Labour Party in Glasgow. It didn't matter to me what he was: Tory, Labour, Communist, Nationalist, Lib-Dem.

I cannot recollect what the particular issue was; it was during the days of Workers City and there were many issues. I suppose the feature that set off the reflection was me being sickened by the actions of politicians who are supposedly left-leaning, whatever that might amount to nowadays.

Each time anyone puts party or group interest first in such circumstances the value of human beings is reduced. I apply this to those who use religious conviction in like manner. If they cannot allow their humanity to take precedence then it is all one to me what message they profess. Do that on your own time.

All that counts is what they do. There is nothing else. I would rather have nothing than an empty promise. It leads to expectations and expectations confuse the issue. That is their function, to confuse the issue. Most expectations are false; they are built on empty promises.

A quick definition of morality: that mental or psychological quirk we share as human beings. The one that has us perform acts of kindness and self-sacrifice for others of the species. There is nothing to gain whatsoever. Not even 'feeling good'. That doesn't come into it. Empathy has a major part in it. We just want to see other people doing well. I don't mind if we call it solidarity. Whatever it is, the end is how we do ourselves in, how we sacrifice ourselves for the sake of others, and sometimes it goes as far as 'the supreme sacrifice', in other words, laying down your life.

That kind of behaviour is what the establishment encourages us to associate with saints, martyrs, soldiers and great theological figures of the past. The odd thing is that once we examine this area of self-sacrifice, of putting ourselves in the line of fire to protect somebody else, we find that it

happens all the time. It is so common that when it doesn't occur we get irritated, upset, annoyed, and want to talk about it - see him, he's a selfish bugger, always puts himself first. If we look at the work of any stay-at-home parent, usually a mother, what we see is self-sacrifice on a daily - even hourly - basis; giving up your life for the sake of others.

I'm not being facetious. Every grandparent in this audience knows what I'm talking about. Every parent knows what I'm talking about. Every sister, every brother, uncle or auntie. Every carer knows what I'm talking about. Those who give themselves to help make a better life for those close to us, and not only people we know, we do it for strangers; and for some it can be done for 'the good of the cause.'

Once we get to this point we can reel off name after name of folk we know who gave their lives for others, and whether or not they were atheists or held religious beliefs, who knows, it does not enter into it. They were human beings.

We are human beings. We treat people as people and we demand that we ourselves are treated as people. We don't ask. We demand. We demand because it is our right. It is an inherent right. This is what it is to be human. We have to begin from that. We have rights. The one that we are demanding here today is the right to be treated as human beings.

We have to let the political and state authorities see and understand that this is our position. We are here and we are not going away. We cannot go away. This is our place.

I don't care what your politics are or if you hold religious or other beliefs. Just don't use it as a reason to hurt my family or destroy my community.

But if you insist then show me what you believe. Express it to me. Let me see it in your actions. Don't separate your actions from your beliefs. Don't tell me that your hands are tied.

No right of authority supercedes the right of human beings. Somebody in power tells us a thing is true, "Oh my hands are tied, much as I would like to, I can't, oh I'm so sorry."

How come? Who is tying your hands? Where is the evidence? I don't see any ropes. Are you talking about party directives? party whips, party leaders? bishops, rabbis, mullahs, priests, ministers - who are you talking about? Who or what is that authority? All I see is another human being saying no.

Forget the reasons. At what point is 'having a reason' just making an excuse. No wonder we turn away, no wonder we can't look you in the eye. The phrase 'beyond contempt' does have a meaning.

No end justifies the sacrifice of another human being. Sacrifice is personal. Each of us might sacrifice ourself. Nobody has the right to sacrifice somebody else.

The politicians and bureaucrats have taken directives from a higher authority and are party to decisions that hurt innocent people very badly; their quality of life will deteriorate to something that most people here cannot grasp.

Myself and four other writers, Alasdair Gray, Liz Lochhead, Tom Leonard and Bernard MacLaverty were glad to offer our support publicly to the struggle to keep the day-centres open and available for people with learning disabilities. There were those who found our support unacceptable, including a couple of charities and agencies. I was advised that I should be "better informed about this debate" before showing such support.

Like other members of the general public I do my best to keep up, not on every issue but on some. I am not a specialist in the area. But I am a citizen and I demand the right to show solidarity for whoever I see fit. We do not have to be specialists in order to lend support. We do not have to be specialists to condemn the actions of elected members of our local and national government. That is part of the democratic process.

Councillors, MPs and MSPs are there to represent the people. They were not elected to keep us in our place, not to manage us on behalf of the British State. Unfortunately that is the role many politicians have adopted. They are the bulwark between the State and the people. This is the role of Her Majesty's Government anyway and it is foolish to see it as something other than that. But individual politicians have a chance to try for something else, without breaking the reins altogether. The role of the Scottish Government in this context is a complication that requires more than this talk can cope with.

It is worth reminding ourselves why the British Labour Party was formed in the first place (which is also of value in considering the position of the SNP). It was not to take up the role of Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition, it was to represent and express the interests of assorted left-wing groups and formations attached to the labour and socialist movements. There was no 'party' interest in that sense, it was a federation; solidarity between its diverse interests.

In recent years even to ask a politician a question is enough to bring a biting response: why are you asking me that? What business is it of yours? Are you a member of this party? Do you live in this constituency? Is your own family involved personally? Have you any direct experience?

No. No no no.

What are you, an external agitator?

No, I just want to ask a question. I'm a citizen. Citizens can ask a question. If the politicians don't want to answer then I shall make my own judgment on why that it is.

I have a question for you. Here is my question: Whom do you represent? Whom do you think you represent?

Older people will remember Margaret Thatcher telling us that society does not exist; there is no such thing as society. What an extraordinary thing to say. But that is what the Prime Minister of Great Britain and Northern Ireland declared to the public. Maybe she believed it. Perhaps it didn't exist for her and her family, for the wealthy and powerful and those who kow-tow to them. That might be how it is for them, the way they hang on to their riches and keep control of the power: look out for yourself: all for one and one for one and devil take the hindmost. But for the rest of us: no.

We have a tradition of struggle in this part of the world. Some great men and women have stood up and fought for the rights of the people, and some of those were politicians. John Maclean attended a class for socialists as a young man, down in Cromwell Street; he met his wife along from St George's Cross. Keir Hardie is buried less than half a mile from here, up the road in Maryhill Cemetery. A few are buried at the foot of this street, Duart Street, in a wee cemetery hardly anybody knows about, now delapidated, falling to bits. Arthur O'Neil is buried there. He led the Maryhill branch of the Chartists; the march began in Sandbank Street and a flute band led them off, Catholics and Protestants united marching together; more than a hundred and fifty years ago - eighty years before Jim Larkin did the same in Belfast.

Now what have we got?

Maryhill, Calton and Shettleston: what do they represent? Three of the most deprived inner-city districts in Great Britain. Local politicians not

fighting on their behalf should hang their heads. The hypocrisy and the humbug are difficult to take. It lies at the core of this struggle in which one of the most disadvantaged and vulnerable groups in our society is forced to take on the authorities. This concept, “personalization”. Here is the shadow of that same right-wing thinking we associate with hardline governments in times of so-called austerity, whether Tory *or* Labour - we just need to think of people like Tony Blair and Gordon Brown.

I turned 67 years of age in 2013. I used to have a secret fantasy: that I might get signed by Partick Thistle as a kind of late-starter, and play professional football. Too late. It is not just unlikely it is impossible. Whether I like it or not I now belong to the society of ancient males, the community of elderly fellows, I’m a pensioner. An auld guy. I might be a fit auld guy, a lazy auld guy, or a fantasizing auld guy, but I’m always an auld guy.

I cannot become what I am not. No matter how hard I try. This is what gives the lie to that delusional fantasy delivered by right-wing societies everywhere. We've all got the X factor. Let it escape. It's all in the mind! We can be what we want to be! Hurreh. You too can be a star.

In life there are circumstances beyond our control. That is how things are. We learn to adapt. The ageing process is beyond our control. No, we cannot be whatever we want to be. This is a convenient lie pedalled by the State. It is not "up to us."

This concept “personalisation” is stuffed down our throats. In a couple of years time nobody will remember a damn thing about it. Except the effects it produced, the damage, and the horror for individual human beings who cannot deal with such concepts but are forced to deal with the consequences. People blaming themselves. Disability is transformed into "inability". This is what these horrors in government and departments of State force people

to deal with. You don't have a learning disability, just an inability to make the correct choice, an inability to learn by your own experience.

“Personalisation” is grounded on choice and control: as if because we are human we each have the same choice in life, it is a matter of control; if we exercise the necessary control everything will be okay.

That is the myth. And how convenient it is. If anything goes wrong it is our fault. We haven't made the right choices. We haven't exercised the proper control. Be it on our own heads. It is us. We have failed.

How often are people left thinking that: it's my fault, I'm sorry, I've failed, failed again, again and again. No matter how hard I try I always seem to fail.

Twenty years ago I was standing in William Hills bookie along the road there and I heard some cheeky bugger saying loud enough for me to hear: There he goes, Summerston's only Booker prize winner. It so happens that cheeky bugger was a close friend of mine and he still is, he's sitting here in this very room. Now in that particular novel, *How Late It Was, How Late*, the main character is a guy who goes blind. He is not born blind, but he ends up becoming blind. No matter how hard he tries he cannot see. But that doesn't mean he isn't trying. And it doesn't mean he's doing something wrong. He isn't. He's trying as hard as it is possible for any human being in his situation.

The important point is, that “how hard he tries” does not come into it. “How hard he tries” is irrelevant. For as long as this man is blind he will never ever see. That is the nature of blindness. That is what being blind means.

If you have no legs then you cannot walk. There may be mechanical aids and other devices which will help you get by, manufactured and assisted by other human beings. But it cannot be done without them.

Question: What is the biggest support human beings can ever have, the one that helps us deal with the most difficult things in life?

Answer: Other human beings.

Through the love and care of other human beings; through their work and their help, their advice and their support, we are able to adjust and adapt and learn to deal with all manner of infirmities and disabilities. I'm not just talking about family, friends and acquaintances here - but people we don't even know, people who live in other constituencies, other parts of the world.

Human beings are social beings. We are not isolated individual units all living isolated individual lives in lonely wee apartments and solitary bedsitters. We live with one another and we live among one another, whether in towns, villages or cities. We think about one another. And we care for one another. Whether the British State authorities and politicians like it or not, we are social beings, that is what we are, that is the nature of humanity no matter what they keep trying to tell us. They only want us to think like that because it makes it easier to pick us off.

No, we don't exist as isolated individuals in charge of our own isolated wee individual budgets, transformed into isolated wee individual self-employed businesses or some such nonsensical crap. We are human beings. How we cope with this life is not a metaphor.

It angers me that the political and permanent authorities give us the "personalisation" argument here in Scotland. What it reveals is their depth of ignorance. How many cultures are there where those in control have so little knowledge and understanding of their own intellectual history?

Our tradition is the opposite of that essentially right wing thinking, that people are in isolation, making their own primary choices, from their own individual understanding. Our tradition is based on an arrival at

understanding through the workings of society, through the way we live with one another, how our communities interweave. We learn from one another.

We survive not only through our own experience but through the experience of our neighbours and families; our fellow human beings. We also learn from those who have gone before. If we didn't we would be stuck in caves wearing the skins of dead animals.

Solidarity is strength. Community is strength.

We live together. Whether we like it or not! We don't always like our neighbours; even family members. But we live with them. We go down to Asda or Lidl to get the messages, along with a couple of thousand other people. If Asda runs out of carrots somebody tells us there's plenty down in Tesco's, and then it is up to us to decide if we can be bothered getting a bus down the road, or else do we just buy a bloody turnip!

We have the choice and we have that control. But notice too that our knowledge has come by exchanging information with other people. This is how we learn there isn't any carrots. And if there's an elderly or sick neighbour maybe we'll offer to get their carrots while we're at it. We're all part of a community. We exchange information and we learn through experience; not just our own but through the experience of other people.

We don't want to see people suffering, under the worst kinds of stress and pressures, not if we can help it. That is what solidarity is and what a community should be, and can be.

The "personalisation" process Glasgow Council wants to implement on behalf of the Whitehall government pretends to empower people with learning disabilities. In reality it robs them. Forget the money. We cannot put a price on the quality of people's lives. What we know, and it is inevitable, is that this process will rob people of a crucial part of their

everyday life; not only their own but their carers and families. It robs them of friendships, it robs them of community, it robs them of the chance to mature and to develop as only happens within a community.

Glasgow Council gives us the economic argument and wants to speak about “viability”. It really is shameful. It is hard to listen to them talking in that way; acting as though they are the mature and responsible people, we are the ignorant, the naive.

Of course everybody should be out in the wider world. Nobody would deny that. And they would if they could. But not everybody can. No matter how hard they try. People must rely on the support of others. It is not a choice. It is a necessity. This is the nature of "learning disability".

That is why has to be examined for what it is, not for what those in authority say it is. The authorities are not introducing this measure in order to provide greater care and attention to the needs of people. Their cynicism allows them to state such publicly. Reduced budgets, reduced budgets. It is the best they can do within a range of necessary cost-cutting exercises.

We aren't fools. We know that funding is being slashed by national government, that Councils are being pushed into doing things that goes against the grain. But they were wrong not to take the carers and families themselves into the discussion at a point where their voices might have been heard in a meaningful way, before the final decisions were taken. It is shocking that this didn't happen. Our knowledge of this is the key to our understanding of how Glasgow Council operates. The way I see it they perpetrated a fraud to protect themselves, that their political cowardice and moral bankruptcy wouldn't be exhibited to the public.

The day-centre was the place where people with learning disabilities and their families and carers could meet for respite, in an environment of mutuality. They could discuss their own issues and problems. They could

learn from one another, share the benefits of their experience. They could have a laugh together, play together and love and learn and talk *together*, in the company of their peers, friends, people who will not judge them. Leave that to the authorities. They judged them, then condemned them.

(2013)