

An Economy We Own A Society We Shape

A Statement to Members
Spring 2015

Preface

Dear Colleague

This new publication is designed to generate discussion and debate within NIPSA and the broader trade union movement in an effort to improve our understanding of the nature of the social, economic and financial crisis we currently face and of the potential solutions which have the wellbeing of the broad mass of people at their core.

NIPSA has resisted the privatisation of public services for over 30 years, not only because of the negative impact on members, but also because there is something fundamentally wrong about ceding to private sector businesses for private profit the responsibility for delivering public services to the community. We have stressed in all our anti-privatisation campaigns the need to retain services within the public sector in order to maintain some public accountability and democratic control over what are, in essence, the services that form the basis of a decent society. These should be run for the benefit of society not individual shareholders.

This argument was also used by the trade unions to challenge the privatisation of a wide range of public utilities such as electricity, gas, railways, telecommunications, postal services, water and sewage, refuse collection, street cleaning, etc. If we are opposed to the denationalisation or demunicipalisation of services, then the next logical step is that we should seek to transfer into public ownership a whole range of economic activity that is critical to the wellbeing of citizens. It is all too painful to observe how decisions by large transnational companies can negatively impact on the social and economic wellbeing of whole communities as a result of decisions taken in boardrooms to safeguard or enhance the profit margins of the same companies. The decision by Japan Tobacco to shut down its operation in Ballymena, Co. Antrim, with the loss of around 900 jobs exposes the imbalance in power between not only capital and labour, but also between capital and the political system. Economic decisions affecting the future of communities and workers are taken without reference to elected political representatives who like the workers and their organisations, can be marginalised.

There is a fundamental problem about the democracy within our neo-liberal economic system that prioritises corporations over communities and profits over people. We do not accept this has to be the case. Our demand for the extension of public control over decision making necessarily leads us to consider the extension of public control over economic and financial activity as a means of improving and deepening real democracy in our society. There are no blueprints or certainties about the future but the trade union movement has a particular responsibility to try to decipher the complex challenges our members face and to identify in its broadest sense an alternative way forward.

Yours Sincerely



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Introduction

In November 2013 NIPSA published a Statement to Members¹ that provided an overview of the economic context within which direct assaults on work-based terms/conditions and the shape of the society in which we live were taking place. This document stated that what is referred to as an “austerity” programme involving attacks on pay, pensions and the very concept of social security is, in fact, a “continuation of a long-standing class war against the positive, progressive and historic protection that the collective struggles of the trade union and labour movement have brought about.”² The document made clear that while capitalism (in its current form often referred to as “neo-liberalism”) has always had its periods of “boom” and “bust”, what we are now experiencing is what the market driven system looks like without the public relations gloss it employs during short-lived periods of economic growth. For this reason we stated that it was an illusion to regard “austerity” as a temporary, malicious ‘blip’ that would be followed by a kinder form of capitalism once the “nation’s finances are in order”. Instead our overview emphasised that while this is a crisis of the capitalist class’ making, it is up to all of us to play a part in the fightback against it.

Why a new strategy?

This analysis starts from a recognition that, historically, the best we have achieved as a society was won by collective struggle and that capitalism then or now must be fought both by defensive organisation against its specific attacks and also by developing a broader, inspiring alternative to it. At the core of this fightback we stressed that, given the ambition of the anti-democratic forces ranged against us, we need to play our part in a wider debate about the sort of society in which we want to live. The reason for this is that if we state that the onslaught we are facing is of historic significance (with the stagnation in wages of Victorian³ proportions and the proliferation of food banks⁴ in one of the richest economies in the world proof enough of this), it is surely all the more necessary that the nature of our challenge to it goes beyond a narrow defence of existing working conditions, essential though that defence is. While we, as a union, are non-party political and will continue to engage in “the battle of ideas” against austerity, our demands within such activity must be broadened. This means that as part of the wider trade union movement we wish to play our part in advancing “an alternative economic and political strategy to the neo-liberalism being foisted upon us...arguing for an economy that we own, a socialist economy that is fully democratic, that plans in order to meet the needs of our people, and that operates in solidarity with our local, national and international allies.”⁵

Widening our ambition

The purpose of this document is to look at what such an alternative economy would look like. This is not some rigid, dogmatic prescription; instead it offers a radical, broad-based, humane and democratic contrast to the inhumane society that the market's lust for profit has created. It is crucial that the more the current system and its apologists want to reduce "debate" to the sterile, narrow ground of "what cut do you support?" (a ransom note of "choose now: or the lollipop lady gets it"⁶), the more necessary it is to keep our eyes on the core questions upon which we can build an economy of our own.

This means focusing on the key questions - "who runs society?" and "in whose interests should it be run?" Much of our immediate discussion, therefore, is about restoring to our movement a broad range of core issues about what needs to be done as much as it is about the *full* detail of how it could be done. While the latter will obviously acknowledge the limitations of what are "national" questions being posed in a limited, regional economy, the point is to use the scale of the needs we outline to inform our immediate and/or transitional demands. This challenges what is currently stopping us getting what we need and widens our ambition rather than self-censors it. In short it shows that the labour movement has a radical vision of a different, better society.

Fighting for progress

This broader ambition will inevitably draw criticism, including the charge that it is utopian. Such a "charge" is not new; indeed there is not a progressive development in history that would not have been regarded as unrealisable when first raised. We should note, for example, that in the UK universal suffrage itself has always been viciously restricted in class and gender terms. This has only been in place for all adults over the age of 21 since 1928 and forty years later was still subject to distortion by property holding/university association allowing extra votes. When the battle is won, however, it appears the journey from an "extreme" to a mainstream idea is accurately described in the phrase - "first they ignore you, then they say you're mad, then dangerous, then there's a pause and then you can't find anyone who disagrees with you."⁷

At the beginning of struggle, however, when victory seems far from certain we should remember that:

A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at. It leaves out the one country at which Humanity is always landing. And when Humanity lands there, it looks out and seeing a better country, sets sail. Progress is the realisation of Utopias.⁸

We need to start by showing our reactionary critics the contempt they deserve. These "experts" have: defended every aspect of the catastrophe that market capitalism has

brought to the world; were complicit in the failure to see the financial meltdown we predicted prior to 2008 and still have the audacity to state our demands are naïve, threatening and unrealistic. We have to face such critics head on. They may have lost some of their “end of history” arrogance displayed in the 90s (i.e. that an invincible, stable market capitalism is and would be the only show in town), but those forces who say progressive ideas are dead still devote phenomenal amounts of their time and resources to smearing, harassing, blacklisting, intimidating and hacking all those who attempt to show that “another way is possible”. Why would they go to such efforts to fight a spectre that has no appeal? The answer is simple - because they want to distract from the attraction and the basic truth of what we convey, that there is nothing utopian or extreme in trying “to build an economy in *our* interests as if people mattered.”⁹

An economy that is democratic

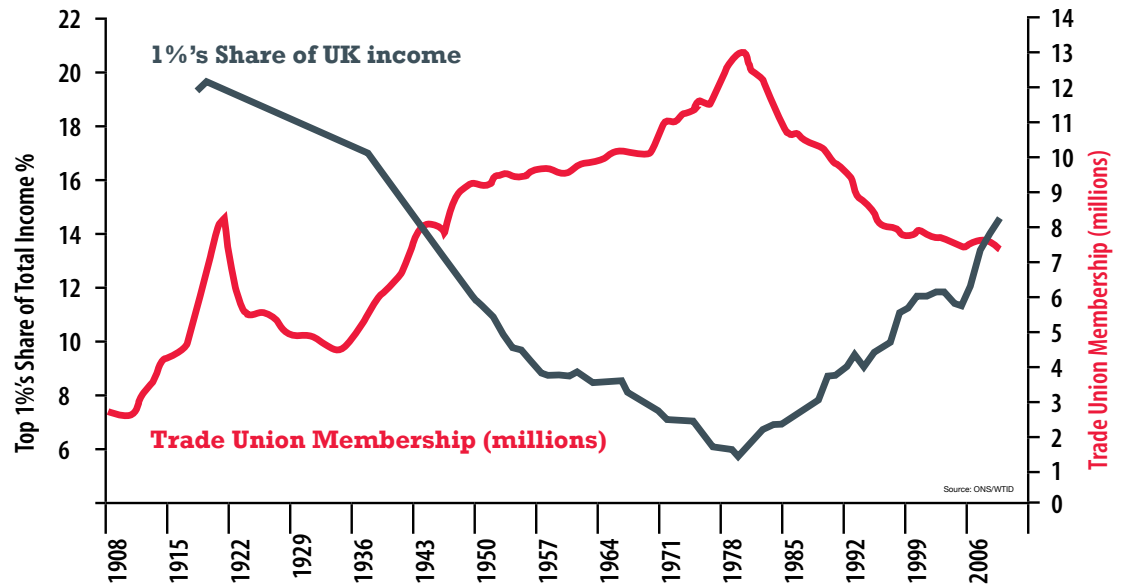
Given the weight and persistence of reactionary propaganda, it is important that our message cuts its way through a jungle of lies, breaks down concepts that have been smeared and presents them as the logical and common sense alternative that they are. Firstly, to contrast with the top-down market driven model we are enduring at the moment, we look at what the real “democracy” in the economy we are proposing would look like.

We start by focusing on the world of work and its products to emphasise that it is labour that is the source of society’s wealth. From this we then insist that the workforce (drawn from the full talent that society has to offer) who create this wealth has the capability and right to have a say in every aspect of their own working environment and to the fair share of the fruits of this labour as it is distributed throughout wider society. In this way, the workplace and its products are shaped democratically and serve the needs of society as a whole.

This approach would begin to reverse the system, established over the last 30 years, where workers fail to receive appropriate “reward” for their labour and the needs of wider society are inadequately served. This model has led to the proportion of what is produced in the economy (measured as GDP) not returned to workers in wages but redistributed upwards. As a consequence, Chief Executive pay that in 1979 was “15 times the average wage... [is] now 133 times”¹⁰ it. The very fact that the idea of the “working poor” is an unchallenged fact and that a campaign for a “living wage” has to be fought *at all*, exposes both how skewed society’s values have become and the capitalist lie of “trickle down” economics. What is also clear is the check on obscene inequality that trade union activity and presence provides. It is this fact that has led to the phrase “the only thing the 1% fear is the 99% getting organised.” See Figure 1.

Figure 1

The only thing the 1% fear... ...is the 99% getting organised



Trade Unions at the heart of society

Such unequal distribution of reward and re-structuring of society has been backed by legal enforcement, allowing the free marketeers to shape the economy into one where the workforce is de-skilled, de-unionised and precarious (in hours and reward). An economy of our own has to attempt to reverse this assault. As it can be convincingly argued, therefore, that “nothing has contributed more to giving the individual increased freedom in our society over the past hundred years than the collective struggle of the labour movement”,¹¹ it follows therefore that a democratic economy cannot be built without the restoration (or creation) of trade union presence and full bargaining rights in every workplace. In addition, as strategic decisions must represent the outcome of a fully democratic process, the appropriate structures that fulfill this involving manager, worker, elected representative and the public they serve have to be established. (See “new public ownership” discussion below.)

This is the society we aim to build, but in order to deal with current inequality, now more than ever we need trade unions that are free to defend fully workers’ terms and conditions. As a matter of priority, therefore, the full strait-jacket of anti-trade union labour laws must be repealed and full employment rights guaranteed to all workers on day one of employment. Legal empowerment, the guarantee of having access to justice via the Tribunal system, would also commence at this point.

Inclusion starts with anti-discrimination

We cannot start to draw upon the full talents of our society however, or establish a democratic base for change unless we start by addressing the issue of discrimination, particularly that of gender. It says much about the inhumanity of capitalism that it is rooted in the structural discrimination and exclusion of over half of the population in terms of how, as a rule, women are treated by it. This patriarchy has sought to limit women's opportunity to have equal and full citizenship within society including longstanding resistance to any attempt by women to control their own fertility. This has been compounded by the lack of supportive frameworks that would allow such citizenship via educational and social security systems. In the world of work, capitalism has been content for a majority of women, even in some of the most advanced economies, to dominate sectors in which jobs are less well paid. In addition, they are expected to provide the capitalist system's free safety nets in lifelong unpaid "roles" of home help, mother, carer, etc. The dominant presence of women within the insecure (pay, pensions, hours) neo-liberal economic model is merely the latest manifestation of the double exploitation (class and gender) facing women.

A new economy, therefore, has to address the key issue of women's rights within it. No wider exploitation can be challenged without this issue being central to it. Other rights we argue for in the rest of this document remove ill-reward/insecurity/lack of employment rights for all workers, but to do so in employment sectors dominated by women will have a particularly positive effect on gender equality. Further intervention on pay, such as compulsory equal pay audits, followed by the enforcement of equal work for equal pay would further assist this by a direct attack on inequality in the workplace, as would positive discrimination to overcome structural discrimination. These moves would be allied to the maximum strengthening of laws against discrimination in all its divisive and corrosive forms (e.g. gender, religion, race, age, disability, sexual orientation, etc.).

Of course this attempt to establish equality of access to a full participative democracy would have to be matched by the creation of mechanisms for all parents, not merely women, to be supported in relation to childcare, within the social security system (as discussed below) in pre-school, after-school and school holiday nursery/daycare provision and flexible working arrangements.

New workforce, same class

As part of a broader vision we must view the “new world” of a globalised workforce or different type of work as an opportunity, not as something that *necessarily* assists our enemies or, as has been argued in some quarters, that marks the “end of the working class”. Instead, when we look at the effects of globalisation we should not ignore:

“the potential power of the working class, which can grow via new union methods of working across national borders...the present phase of globalised capitalism is characterised by a shift of power and a predominantly, neo-liberal conceptual model. It is not necessary to meet any of this with passive submissiveness. On the contrary, to be incensed at injustice is precisely the mobilising force needed to turn developments in the opposite direction.”¹²

While the sociologists obsess on the post-industrial loss of labour’s big battalions of industrial workers, we can busily seek to attract the mass of new workers who need organising and support as well as re-establishing unionised powerbases in our traditional strongholds. In this way it is not the nature of the work that is relevant, what matters is that we mobilise around the demand of genuine security in employment, working hours that are guaranteed but not excessive (with a shorter working week itself generating more jobs), full employment protection and reward at work with pay no less than a **newly defined** living wage. This wage itself will only represent one part of wider support mechanisms within society.

Democracy daily, not every four/five years

This is about moving to a fully participative, democratised workplace linked to the wider society. It would show ‘democracy’ is not a one off event, exercised in a rare visit to a ballot box every four or five years. Instead, it is about active citizenship from citizens inspired enough to want to be active. The narrative from the political class for over a decade has been that the public is not interested in politics. That may be true in relation to the dreary, insincere point scoring and careerist gossip inside the media bubble, but the public reaction to *this* type of politics is not indifference, it is contempt. It is also frustration that there can appear to be no effective outlet for anger against it. By contrast when or if people feel the issues under discussion genuinely affect their lives, a truer democratic engagement *is* possible. The participation rates in the 2014 referendum on Scottish independence (97% of the electorate registered,¹³ turnout over 84%¹⁴) prove this to be the case. While for years mainstream opinion stated as “fact” that the electorate had “switched off” from politics, events in Scotland showed political debate to be alive and well. In this way, people of all ages (including the newly enfranchised 16 and 17 year olds) showed

us all, and most of all a frightened Westminster Establishment, what real political engagement actually looked like. An economy we own therefore demands the extension of political accountability into every aspect of our lives and the widening of the formal franchise to give the vote to 16 and 17 year olds.

Power to the citizen's ballot, not the corporate wallet

The development of democratic demands, the attempt to transfer “power from the wallet to the ballot”,¹⁵ has been long-standing and bitterly fought. The powerful, who see their “ill-gotten gains” threatened by such developments, have never regarded concessions as irreversible. When they grumble about “red tape” or “over-regulation” they are usually complaining about hard-won protections against damaging corporate behaviour. They use each and every opportunity to undermine the universalism and control (however limited) any democratic break on corporate profiteering has brought about¹⁶. This is a form of “social revenge, [by the] economic and political elite in society...to re-conquer privileges they lost through the democratisation, regulation and re-distribution of the welfare state.”¹⁷

This fits an historic pattern where the capitalist ruling class has never hesitated to undermine democratic challenge by whatever means, including fascism. We cannot therefore be complacent that democratic rights already secured are won forever or cannot be threatened by other means. Democratic demands that insist on the direction, control and scrutiny of all economic decisions that affect us are therefore key. Building this *direct* democracy is an essential bulwark against those forces at all levels who would seek to undermine a people's economy in order to wrest back control of it for the profiteers. This is why it is essential that credibility is grown in work-based struggles linked to the wider community. This ensures that our project is not about an elitist, top-down approach that is “owned” by a few individuals, however talented. If it was, the errors or removal of such individuals would be all it would take to lead to ruling class counter-attack, defeat and demoralisation. Instead we fight for an economy that is shared by and fully accountable to the proper democratic scrutiny of an organised popular majority – a majority whose aim is to grow as fully formed active citizens, not mere consumers.

New public ownership

This extended democracy links the workplace where wealth creation and socially useful activity is carried out to the wider society that such work would serve. But there would be no point in such a re-structuring of society if the fruits of this labour still ended up in too few hands. Instead what is required is the full public ownership of public services. In order to create an economy we own, therefore, we start by rejecting the privatisation model that has stolen from and failed us. In the privatisation model, “costs go up; services get worse; private companies are not accountable and staff are undermined.”¹⁸ Its short termism slaughtered the “geese that lay golden eggs”¹⁹ for “a one-day fry up” enjoyed by a few already rich individuals. This made long-term sustainable economic planning impossible.

We must therefore reverse this approach. We must insist the utilities that include “natural” and essential resources - electricity, gas, water, transport, telecommunications, etc. - are taken into our own hands (**nationalised**), for the common good, under democratic control. Only then through the (democratically determined) most appropriate form of nationalisation can we fully control the **distribution** of essential resources and their **exchange**, i.e. establish a just price for them. This form of economic control also means we can regulate the working conditions of those who provide our services.

Investment for sustainable development

The need for investment in infrastructure is essential so that “our” economy and every aspect of “our” natural and built environment is ours to shape and control. Even at a regional level, how is it that 50 years ago we had a municipal infrastructure capable of generating its own gas, trams and railways yet to call for investment in such concepts today is treated as fanciful? On environmental grounds alone we should be capable of facilitating the infrastructural change that would switch the amount of freight moved by road and in the air to rail.

The other advantage of public control over such development is that it ensures the question of the “environment”, i.e. the protection of the planet, is not an afterthought but a core part of any discussion of economic development. This would replace the unquestioning dash for capitalist “growth” that is already destroying the planet’s finite resources and replace it with an approach that is planned, regulated and sustainable. In this context, i.e. saving the planet, never was the historic choice of “socialism or barbarism” more appropriate.

Economic control to serve our needs

The large scale investment we propose, whether in health, housing, transport, (renewable) energy, etc. would be directed into operation for society as a whole and the working conditions of the staff that run them. This is a virtual circle of an economy run by and for us rather than the daylight robbery of our taxes as well as unregulated and extortionate rent, bills and fares being used to feed the greed of the utilities' shareholders.

Such an approach is in tune with public opinion that supports the idea of public ownership. This general mood should be strengthened by an explicit, positive case for why this model is the way ahead being stated. This case would make clear that only such an ownership model, one that is in our hands, has any chance of driving advances for the majority of the population in terms of: economic efficiency; challenging unequal ownership of capital; controlling the cost of living; creating socially constructive employment opportunities and raising the standard for **all** workers (as the private sector has to compete with a progressive public sector). In short, this is about the economic control and solidarity of pooled resources servicing the needs of an entire population.

Why public service delivery matters

In terms of delivery, an economy we own gives us the control and transparency currently impossible within our current economic system. For example, much current delivery of public services by private providers is little more than a proxy whereby the state can meet minimal obligations via such providers whose operation is underwritten by it. If we insisted, for example, that the current "private providers" in healthcare pay their staff a living wage what would happen? They would threaten to not provide it unless they got more money from the state to do so. In effect, therefore, we accept that vital services to one part of society are carried out by facilitating companies who fail to pay their employees a living wage. Such an injustice must end. We should provide these services **directly**, offering what is best for the public and workforce, both elements of whom should be empowered to collaborate in improving such service. (See Health discussion, below.)

This means that when we talk about "public ownership", we are not sanitising failings of accountability within past or present public ownership structures. What we are doing is establishing as a first principle, that only when *our* resources and *our* services are in *our* rather than private hands can they be properly used in *our* interests. This leaves open to full democratic debate the best models of social ownership by which this can be achieved with flexibility about the models we would support in a variety of circumstances/sectors.

Getting access to our money

But there is no point in attempting such a shift of ownership if the control over the finance to do it is itself in private hands. An alternative is therefore needed. This means we have to gain/restore political control over the financial sector (banks, mortgage and insurance sectors) to create a democratic challenge to the dictates of the market. In terms of the banks, while an obvious way, in the UK context, would be to argue for the political control of the Bank of England to be restored, the wider need is for a banking sector that itself is publicly owned and run in the public interest.

This is in contrast to the current approach that bails out this reckless sector with our money, exerts no control over those gifted such state funds, leaves us at their mercy in terms of their refusal to lend and then guarantees future profit is returned to them through re-privatisation. This has been the dominant political trend under free market capitalism, to personalise debt for workers and “socialise” it for the wealthy. Only the public ownership and democratic control of the banking system in particular, therefore, will allow us full access and control of our money in order to plan, invest, create jobs and fully support our people.

Where’s the money?

An alternative programme always meets the question of “where are you going to get the money to pay for this?” As referred to above, in relation to the rescue of the banks, the capitalists themselves have answered the “where’s the money?” question. The bail out of the Royal Bank of Scotland alone, for example, cost £400bn. This is enough money “to build more than 1500 schools or 70 new hospitals”²⁰ while the process of “quantitative easing” to the value of £375 billion represents part of the £1.3 trillion bailout of British capitalism (using our money) since the crash of 2008.²¹

As the UK is the seventh richest economy in the world, we have to stop looking at regional/national wealth through the wrong end of the telescope, treating it as a household budget with bills needing immediate payment. A collective approach, by contrast, looks to the pooling of resources of regions and nations, takes a long-term view, assesses the vast scale of resources beyond the personal and distributes goods and services where they are needed. Such a pooling of resources starts with a principle that has been eroded in the last few decades. It is that we base our society on a tax system that is direct and progressive (i.e. those that have the most pay the most). Such an approach starts by looking at the richest in society **first**, not by looking at the easiest, most vulnerable targets who can be constantly hit by above inflation hikes in their indirect taxes. In order to build a society therefore, the *full* resources of a political entity’s economy must be drawn upon to serve its citizens. In this context we re-state the existing public sector is “an asset to use, not strip”²² and its expansion, under democratic control, a necessity to build the society we need.

Another answer to the “where’s the money?” cynics is to ask them how and from where do we find the money to respond to “unscheduled” foreign policy interventions? For example, while all domestic decisions are locked in a debate about forecast spending and its limits, how is it that “all bets are off” when militarism needs a blank cheque? This is not to comment here on the individual military campaigns, but it does show that the supposedly cash-strapped Treasury *can* “deal with” the unexpected in Libya, Syria, etc. without any hint that the “heavens will fall” from such unexpected spending. In this way, at a time when we are told we cannot afford to stop people freezing to death in the winter, the RAF is dropping bombs in Iraq costing up to a £1 million a missile.²³ Little wonder the arms companies’ profits soar as investment in socially useful manufacturing falls. We must call a halt to our deadly (in every sense) investment in a wasteful, destructive, “permanent war” economy that continues to make the world a more dangerous place.

Whose land is it?

Another question that needs to be fully explored as we look for the resources with which to re-build our society is the question of the ownership and social use of land. If we take the UK as a whole, for example, two thirds of it is in the hands of 0.3% of the people.²⁴ In Scotland, for example, it took until 2004 for the feudal system of land ownership to be abolished. Despite this, “50% of the land is [still] owned by just 432 individuals, 16 of whom own a staggering 10%.”²⁵ In terms of these great holdings we should be asking to what public use are they being put and how should they be used?

It is incredible, for example, that instead of an agricultural policy that would support the small farmer, we have the gross subsidies from the European Union that underwrite industrial-scale farming production to such an extent that the best rewarded “claimants” from the EU’s Common Agriculture Policy (CAP) are among the richest people in Britain.²⁶ By what possible definition could this part of a *common agricultural policy*, supposedly aimed at assisting poorer farmers, skew reward in such a manner? The land is a common treasury and should be used and taxed as such.

If, beyond a personal allowance equivalent to an “average home plot”, land was rigorously taxed, particularly on holdings unproductively hoarded in too few hands, we could use the revenue from this to tackle inequality, specifically the current denial of land necessary for house building. It could also free up space for both manufacturing and agricultural use. The full taxation of such development, which would also create jobs, would, of course, be democratically controlled by environmentally acceptable planning controls. The other advantage of land taxation is that this is one tax that cannot be avoided by fleeing elsewhere, i.e. this is one case where it is impossible for the holdings to be anywhere but *on-shore*!

In terms of genuine social usage, Aneurin Bevan²⁷ once said that the UK was an

“island...made mainly of coal and surrounded by fish. Only an organising genius could produce a shortage of coal and fish at the same time.”

Similarly, in relation to the island of Ireland as a whole or even Northern Ireland, why have we failed to draw properly on *our* natural resources? Why are we, for example, failing to invest fully in wind and wave power, and how can our agricultural wealth be squandered to such an extent that we are reliant on agricultural *imports* from the EU? What “organising genius” facilitates our inability to feed or heat our people in this context?

Tax avoidance – the real anti-social behaviour

If what we have just discussed is about gathering resources from and for all citizens, we have to ensure that the society we build provides no shelter for those who refuse to play their part. The idea of the anti-social behaviour order or ASBO came into being during the Blair Government. While it is correct that citizens be protected from such behaviour at a personal level, a specific anti-social behaviour, one more destructive to society as a whole that needs to be rigorously policed, is that of tax avoidance. It is unjust for one powerful group within society, using an army of accountants to help them to be “tax efficient” (or, as we know it, avoid tax), to opt out of their responsibilities to society. Table 1²⁸ illustrates the gap between the huge revenue and profits from UK sales that a number of well-known companies make and the tax actually paid to the Treasury due to their use of offshore tax arrangements.

Table 1

What they earned, and what they kept

	Revenues from UK Sales	Estimated profit on UK sales	UK tax if levied	Tax actually paid in the UK
Apple	£6bn	£1.3bn	£370m	£10m
Amazon	£3.2bn	£150m	£42m	£517,000
Google	£2.1bn	£750m	£210m	£5m
eBay	£800m	£180m	£50m	£3.4m
Facebook	£100m	£51m	£14.2m	£396,000

In this way such companies benefit from the full, infrastructural environment within which their profiteering can take place yet avoid the tax justice of fulfilling their full responsibilities in taxation to the wider society. This climate of corporate anti-social behaviour has led us to the grotesque position where “the richest 1% of the UK population have as much wealth as the poorest 55% combined.”²⁹

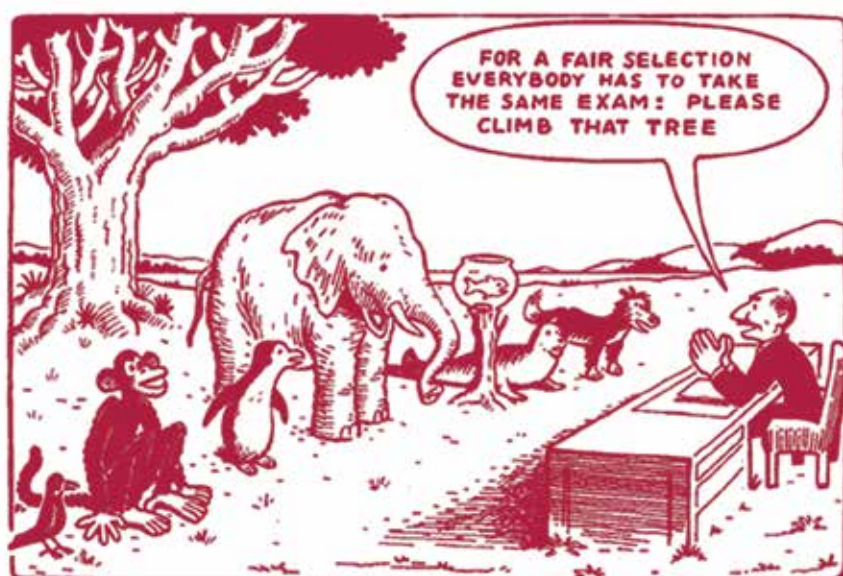
As a society, therefore, we need to apply the same determination in investing in staff/resources to strengthen tax raising services as successive UK Governments and the Northern Ireland Assembly have in campaigning for the “freedom” of corporations to be even more anti-social in their tax policies and pay less corporation tax. This also means we continue to support the wider UK campaigns that highlight and support the pursuit of the “120 billion annually lost through tax evasion, avoidance or non-collection.”³⁰

The “spine” of a new society

The above is about tapping into the vast scale of resources with which we could re-shape society. The following provides a brief overview of some areas that, if properly supported with these resources, would provide the “spine” of this new society in terms of education, social security, health and housing.

Education for all, education for life

Just as we addressed the fact that an economy of our own is about building a just society drawing on all the talents we possess, those talents must be nurtured and developed. They cannot be limited by an education system that only defines success in narrow academic terms and raises the bar further by making it likely that only the wealthy are likely to achieve such standards. Equal access in this capitalist model is a hollow joke well captured in the cartoon below and the accompanying quote from Einstein.



“Everyone is a genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid”

That the most elitist public schools attract charitable status is just one of the many grotesque examples of capitalist education shoring up its own privilege. In a just society, education would not be a “sector”, it would be part of a lifelong experience that does not end when “formal” education does. An economy that we own, therefore, demands investment in education at all levels from the earliest pre-school support to the most sophisticated innovations in University Research and Development. We need therefore an education system that is free, accessible, democratic in its governance, comprehensive in the truest sense, multi-cultural and secular. On the latter point we cannot complain about struggling with diversity, sexism, racism and sectarianism, yet be content to fund and support any education system that perpetuates such division.

A democratic approach to education should also aim at breaking the class based cartel that the best rewarded professions have created for themselves. For example, how much greater would our access to medical assistance or justice be if medicine or law were not treated by workers as “not for the like of us”? If one barrier to access is financial, the provision of study/maintenance grants is the key to lifting it. A mere generation ago post school education was supported with grants – not fees or the personalised debt linked to graduates’ future earnings. A grant system following compulsory age education can and must be restored as an essential way of democratising the path of lifelong learning.

Real social security

An economy of our own would revisit and extend what was the original purpose of social security. This again involves us pooling our resources and looking after each other from the “cradle to the grave”. This means genuine social security not a system that rewards exploitative employers whose low wages are underwritten by the state in the form of tax credits. It also means ending the impersonal and punitive “welfare” system that attacks the most vulnerable in society in the name of “reform”. Instead real social security would end the capitalist “dog eat dog” approach, a world of “you’re on your own” and would involve all citizens being respected as a part of society whether in work or out of it.

The first social security is a basic one - having enough money to live on and this requires the guarantee of a minimum income.³¹ This would be calculated in the first instance (**as we move to an economy of genuine full employment**) by restoring a link between earnings and benefits at all levels from child benefit to retirement pensions. As referred to above, social “security” would also come in the form of wider support frameworks at all levels – childcare, flexible working, pensions and access to free healthcare. In addition, the public ownership/control of utilities and therefore the control of their prices (as discussed above) is itself a social security that is met collectively rather than individually.

Creating a Healthy Society

This emphasises the point that the needs of a society must be addressed in the broadest sense, not by any one sector but by society as a whole. The general question of a society's health is the perfect example of this point as in order to create a healthy population you need to create a generally healthy society whose health needs are addressed in a genuinely holistic way within it. Any other approach asks a health service to do the impossible - to mop up all the wider ills of society. We should remember, for example, that the Minister for Health (Bevan) who founded the NHS was also Minister for Housing. In other words he and the other social visionaries who created the NHS saw health as only one part of society, the needs of which had to be addressed through eradicating all of the five giant evils – 'want', 'disease', 'ignorance', 'squalor' and 'idleness'.

While this is what the post WWII settlement aimed to combat, this is not about nostalgia. The same prioritisation of people over corporate profit is still possible. Such a demonstration of political will can be seen most graphically internationally when we compare the health outcomes of two nations who at one point are geographically only 90 miles (but in every other sense are worlds) apart – the United States of America and Cuba. Cuba, a country blockaded and threatened by the United States since 1959, has matched and in many cases exceeded the performance of its rich neighbour, not least in its universal health service available to all its citizens free at the point of use and its "first world" health outcomes (on vaccination, child/maternal mortality, prevention, cure and rehabilitation, community participation in health initiatives, etc.).

This was achieved because the health of the population comes first and no private sector conflict of interest/profit seeking is allowed to diminish this. In addition, for Cuban medical professionals, serving the needs of others is not limited to their own nation, as the international assistance that they have offered the world is legendary. The Cuban approach contrasts with the for profit health policy in the United States that is compromised by its surrender to the corporate health lobby. As recently as 2010 this model tolerated over 15% of its population (nearly 50 million people) having no health insurance at all and millions more fearing the little insurance they could afford would not cover their ill-health.

We should learn from the Cuban model – of health as a social necessity, a right not linked to the ability to pay and politically directed in a progressive rather than market-driven manner. In our health service this would mean that the healthcare workers from all aspects of the health service would, in a democratic manner, shape a service for us based on patient need. This would mean no place for the toxic, disruptive presence of the private sector in our NHS. It would also mean that the pharmaceutical industry, like all other industry, would be viewed in the context of its benefit to wider society. As this would prioritise the protection of patient health rather than the exclusivity of potentially profitable patents, such control and development would most effectively take place in public rather than private ownership.

The Right to Housing

As with health, so with housing. The housing “crisis” captures the madness the market fanatics have unleashed upon us. It is clear that the removal, over 30 years ago, of mass public housing provision unpicked a key seam in the fabric of society with the long term repercussions of this neo-liberal approach (sub-prime lending, mortgage debt, homelessness, profiteering in the acquisition of properties bought as assets not homes,³² vacancy) continuing to dominate our society. The issue has been so distorted that a discussion on housing becomes about many things (the access to mortgages, the property ladder, a substitute pension plan, a question of equity, etc.) but not about the core element that matters – that “housing” should be about how the population as a whole has an affordable, acceptable “roof” over their heads as of right. This can only be guaranteed with a mass house building programme in order to create a stock of publicly owned, affordable housing.

The affordability of this access provides a stability and justice that a private housing market cannot. To achieve this, a democratic society that we own would impose strict rent controls for this social housing. This creates a “benefit cap” we do support – the state capping, indeed ending its subsidy of private landlords who can currently charge what they wish knowing the state will make up the rent shortfall *to them* in housing benefit. Our economy would stop making the landlord class even richer and instead directly provide social housing. In short we would support the tenant, not subsidise the landlord.

A diverse accountable media

We have talked in this document about communicating a constructive message that change is possible and that we have the ability, collectively, to shape our own economic destiny. But in order to facilitate getting this message out there we also need to address the question of ownership within the mainstream media. The detail from the phone hacking convictions and the revelations about the Murdoch empire’s activities in the 1980s and 1990s confirmed what we already knew. Too much power and influence lay in the hands of too few media barons whose extreme right wing views shaped government policy and public opinion to fit the economic ambitions of their class.

Even after the closure of one corrupt outlet (the News of the World) Murdoch still owns over a third of the UK’s newspaper circulation.”³³ In addition, as we have previously highlighted,³⁴ the huge resources channelled by the corporations towards “astroturf” groups such as the TaxPayers’ Alliance and other right-wing think tanks continues to shape the media onslaught on progressive politics and any challenge to the capitalist system. Such media will happily try to divide us on gender, race, nationality and sexuality – all to perpetuate ignorance throughout wider society and distract from the core problems that confront us.

The poison that results from such a narrow concentration of ownership must be

prohibited. As the National Union of Journalists state, no private interest should be “above public interest journalism [and] media plurality is essential for a free press and a healthy democracy.”³⁵ This widening of ownership should also take place in the local press where, as the Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom and Media Reform Coalition argue, local papers should be treated as “community assets”. In addition, in order to facilitate this democratic challenge and increase accountability in the press and media we need a statutory right of reply and insist that the display of this reply is as prominent as the original story, i.e. if the lie is on page 1, the reply is on page 1. Furthermore, we need an end to the abuse of injunction and libel laws through which only the powerful can protect themselves from press attack.

While in the short term, the trade union movement must also develop to the fullest capacity possible its communications via alternative/social media to subvert the current capitalist ownership of the mass media, we must also continue to challenge the failure of so-called “public” broadcasters to offer a truly diverse range of views. This is evident when the space and time given to the elite of the City of London and their apologists is contrasted with the treatment given to the largest civic group in society – the trade union movement. In this context, the argument for a truly diverse and accountable public service media is a key democratic demand.

Opposing the “bosses club” – from the left

In terms of fighting for an economy of our own, we also have to deal with the fact (as alluded to above re the Common Agricultural Policy) that the structures and rules of the European Union itself provide barriers to exercising our democratic rights. In its original form, the “common market” was once rightfully referred to as a “bosses club”. The expansion of its economic, political and military ambitions via a series of treaties (including the Lisbon Treaty) based on compulsory, uncritical acceptance of market capitalism has shown the accuracy of this description. The illusion of the “social Europe” has been swiftly jettisoned in the “age of austerity” and the full force of undemocratic, anti-worker EU directives (legalising the race to the bottom on terms and conditions, *insisting* on imposing the policies of de-regulation and privatisation) has become clearer.

In addition, the damaging crassness of its project and the failure on the left to challenge it has allowed right wing forces across Europe to mount a narrow, racist opposition to EU expansionism while being silent on wider corporate plunder. On the latter it is significant, for example, that the UK’s right-wing elements are at their most “anti-Brussels” when the City of London’s specific malpractices are threatened, but silent and supportive when the European Union Directives undermine workers’ rights, pay and pensions. The trade union movement should now take on the “bosses club” but from the left, by burying the lie of its social partnership, not praising it.

Real internationalism

To reject the economic shackles of the European Union is not to reject international co-operation, however. Quite the reverse! In the same way as only collective advance will achieve our aims, similar broader progressive alliances are needed across regions, nations and continents. This, as we have previously argued, has to be done “in solidarity with our local, national and international allies”³⁶ to argue common cause against capitalism, not look to scapegoat its fellow victims in a different sector (private v public), demographic (young v older workers/pensioners) or country of origin (migrant v indigenous worker) as their system and media encourage us to do.

Again, this is about lifting our eyes from the only (Anglo-Saxon) models the mass media want us to see and look to developments in the rest of the world. Just as we are conscious of our successful resistance to water privatisation and the current mass campaign on this issue south of the Border, across the world there have been huge campaigns fighting for its retained public ownership. While we are subjected to intense coverage of who might be merely a *candidate* for the North American Presidency, we get next to no information about what some elected *South* American Presidents are actually doing. If we look, for example, at what has been described as 21st Century Socialism, we see “left” movements across a number of nations – in Venezuela, Bolivia, Brazil and Ecuador - that have overcome huge economic, racial, and factional difficulties to build a *broad* popular constituency. They have fought for “what voters, all things considered, want: economic justice, a dignified life, peace and social welfare”.³⁷ With our economic advantages, are we not capable of building a similarly “broad alliance of the alienated, the discontented, the deprived and the dispossessed”?³⁸

Again, it is about bringing some progressive, creative thought to these matters. In terms of how resources are secured for the people, for example, we should look at how Bolivia enshrined this in its legislative framework by making the idea of privatised utilities unconstitutional.³⁹ (The Right2Water campaign in the Republic is currently campaigning for a similar constitutional amendment). Even in the limited regional context, we can use our imagination. A few years ago, for example, (before Boris Johnston stopped the process) the London Assembly signed a deal with Venezuela⁴⁰ that guaranteed cheap fuel for buses and reduced fares for those on benefits. Are we incapable of negotiating such a deal? Perhaps Invest NI should shut down their Saudi office and spend their resources exploring something this progressive?

Conclusion

While it is right to honour the finest progressive achievements as examples of what can be done with planning, concentration on socially beneficial goals, etc, we also need to see these historic achievements as products of their time, reflective of the balance of forces in which they were achieved. It is no accident for example that the 8 hour working day was first legislated for in the West in the wake of the Russian revolution. This reflected both ruling class nervousness and awareness of the scale of the opposition to them. Then, as now, anything and everything that we have achieved was fought for, not gifted to us. This will be no different in the future. While any campaign may start from the point of petitioning the “powerful” on a narrow, specific point, the wider, democratic and transitional demands argued for in this document (that are ultimately about diminishing such undemocratic “power”) should never be lost.

While the forces that oppose us are formidable, even the more astute among them know they are not invincible. In May 2014, for example, a conference under the title “inclusive capitalism”⁴¹ was held. This gathering with a vast corporate presence and speeches from, among others, Christine Lagarde of the IMF and Mark Carney, the Governor of the Bank of England, explored the risks that growing inequality posed for longer term capitalist stability. Their “problem” is that the Keynesian brakes are “off” and a system built with no other dynamic than the search for profit cannot shut down its core self-destructive tendencies.

Their “problem” is our opportunity. The democratic socialist principles and proposals in this document are ambitious, but are “no more fanciful than the notion of a National Health Service free at the point of delivery to taxpayers in the 1920s.”⁴² If the smarter capitalists are “worried”, everything we do to re-build our movement, to fight for an economy we own, a society we shape, should be about giving them reason to worry.

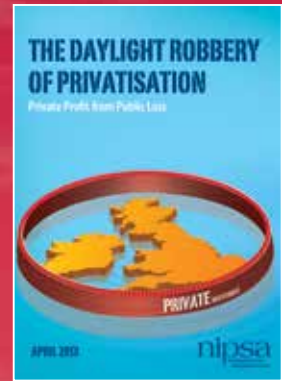
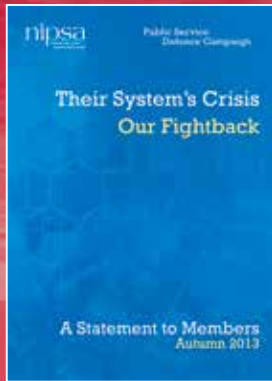
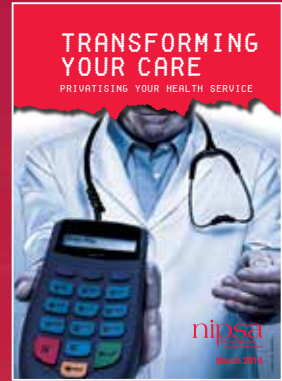
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