

Viewpoint: C'mon the broken people

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I mentioned recently that I might post occasional articles by people other than me on the blog if I thought them worth sharing here. This is the first. It is by Robin McAlpine, who has been a campaigner for longer than he probably cares to remember, and who has been instrumental in the Scottish independence movement, not least through his work with [Common Weal](#), whose work I much appreciate. A thorn in the side of the SNP, he is willing to speak what he thinks. A while ago, National newspaper columnist and activist Lesley Riddoch named Robin and me as two of the three awkward people in the independence movement.

Robin [published this on the Common Weal blog](#) last week:

I grew up in the peace movement in the 1970s and 1980s. My first two decades played out against the backdrop of the Cold War. I absorbed too much information about the terrible, delicate balance the world was in and the horrors of what would happen if that balance failed.

I was a child; the sense of fear and dread didn't follow me when I was climbing a tree or playing hide and seek with my pals, but it was ever-present nonetheless. Looking out of my bedroom window north-westwards, the horizon was framed by two hills. The sun would set between them, but between us and the sun was Faslane. Every escalation in the Cold War drew my eyes to that horizon.

I remember a Christmas Eve when I felt not just a child's excitement but a strange kind of peace and calm. Whatever the future held, no one was going to start a war at Christmas. For the next few days, I didn't need to worry. The nagging fear could be set aside until the New Year. I could be a child at Christmas. Just a child at Christmas. Not a scared kid worried the grown-ups were going to muck it all up.

I had forgotten what that feeling of dread was like until now. By the time I got to university, the Cold War was over. I slept peacefully with only essay deadlines to worry

about. We had a peace dividend, and for those of us in the western part of the global north, it was a pretty carefree time. We had the Balkan wars and the attack on the World Trade centre. We grew a fear of terrorism.

But let's be honest, give or take a few niggling fears about getting on trains or planes, we all knew we'd make it to tomorrow. We had a peace dividend, and let us be honest with ourselves – we pissed it away. We could have used our dominant position to pursue a strategy of creating the kind of global equity that would have given us a chance of peace. We could have listened to the scientists about global warming and chosen not to live with massive wildfires and biblical floods as if they were always there.

We could have done the same at home, listen, change, give people equity in their community. The brutal impacts of inequality are ripping our society apart. It is crushing the life out of public services because inequality makes tax horrendously inefficient.

(Just as a reminder, I [*published a study which showed that*](#) if Scotland had the size of economy it has now but the levels of income equality of a Nordic economy it would have meant a giant group of people who barely pay tax now because of poverty would start paying tax, and the very wealthy and their tax avoidance would decrease sharply. That one step raises an extra £5 billion of tax without adjusting tax rates. That's our public sector problems solved.)

Inequality fuels anger and rage. The fuel of the conspiracy theorist and the far-right populist is the anger and alienation people feel when they sense they are losing equity in their society. And of course there is the brutal, biting poverty.

For many of us the route out of this was independence and a Scotland playing a global role of encouraging people to put fires out, not start them. A Scotland which would reject the UK's economic model and pursue the social equity that creates successful societies. And now it feels to many like that route is gone.

Likewise, many of us also hoped that the UK might change. Corbyn gave us a glimpse of what it might be like if Britain wasn't just run mainly for very wealthy people who live in London. But then very wealthy people in London gave us a glimpse of what they do to anyone who threatens their oligarchy.

We have to be honest about what has happened. We have to be honest about what we and our allies have done to the world. Condemning everyone else for what they do in response isn't enough. We're hypocrites who demand everyone else lives up to standards we don't live up to ourselves.

We have to be honest about what has happened to Britain, not fundamentally different to what is happening across the 'Western Alliance', not quite as far down the road to social collapse that the US is, but worse than much of Europe. We have to be honest

why; Britain is as feudal as it ever was, as controlled by the powerful as it has ever been.

We have to be honest about what has happened in Scotland. Our hope was siphoned off and it was used to further people's careers. We were given promises we believed in and they weren't honest. We invested everything into those promises and it feels like we have little left.

What I hear from people on daily basis worries me. War is the future so we might as well prepare to be the ones doing the killing. Climate change beat us, so let's enjoy our last days. Since Starmer isn't even pretending to make things better I'll just give up on politics. The SNP is so rotten now it isn't even worth trying to save it. Independence is over and now I've got other things to do with my life.

Tell me about it. I get it. I defer, as always, to the Cat in the Hat: "And this mess is so big / And so deep and so tall, / We cannot pick it up. / There is no way at all!". I'm worn out with the fight too. I'm angry at times, resentful at times. 'To hell with them all' my mind goes. As I was writing this something popped into my inbox with a Ernest Hemingway quote: "The world breaks everyone".

Well, this world does. Or that's what it feels like. Except that's not the end of the Hemingway quote. In full it is "The world breaks everyone, and afterwards, some are stronger at the broken places". Because my childhood wasn't just fear, it was hope and solidarity too. As a child I looked up to these stoic campaigners, stronger at the broken places, marching, organising, opposing.

When we marched in a spirit of humanity and determination it was something the fear couldn't touch. The peace movement was a place of gentleness, but never, ever weakness. And yes, we're still marching, but that doesn't mean we didn't change anything. I remember the courage of the miners in the Miners Strike. I remember being on the picket lines, a kid just gone to high school.

I remember the anti-Thatcher movement, phenomenally creative and effective. The Poll Tax riots came right at the cusp of my adulthood. The anti-Apartheid movement stood in the face of almost universal Western support for Apartheid – and won. At no point in my childhood did I ever feel that people had walked away or given up.

Last night my son brought me through his homework to look at. He had to write a sentence using the word 'consequence'. Well the consequence he chose was climate change, and the cause he identified was 'us'. And I realised that my efforts not to scare my kids with the reality of where things are hadn't totally worked. They hear me talking.

So who are they going to look up to? As they start to fear for their future, for their world, to whom are they looking? Right now the causes that offered hope are in retreat.

Participation in activism is way down since the pandemic. The sight of tumbleweed is becoming familiar in Scottish politics.

Well, I'll tell you what; you're the bloody adults. It's your job to be the ones on your feet. When darkness is spreading everywhere, none of us can afford to turn off our own light. We need to shine outwards to people. I feel for you if you're walking away. I'd love to walk away. But you're wrong. You can't. We've got to keep fighting. We've all got to keep fighting.

You might have noticed my writing has changed a bit. I wake up every morning and I ask myself only what I can do today to make something better. Once upon a time that meant persuading you there were big problems ahead. Now that they're here it is only ever about solving those problems. We have to solve our problems. 'Oh well, whatever, it's all fucked' condemns my children to a future filled with things I don't want them to endure.

We cannot give up. The worse it gets, the more determined you must be. We must pick things to rescue from this god-awful omni-crisis and we need to get on with it. Spare me chat about the need for us all to look after ourselves and take a rest. There is no time. This is all happening now. Pick something and ask yourself what you can do today to make it better.

In the end it is another Hemingway quote that really keeps me going; "The world is a fine place and worth the fighting for". It is. So come on my broken people, stronger at the break. Let's get on with it.