VAL MCDERMID AND JO SHARP

Imagine a country . . .

Close your eyes and put your fingers in your ears and shut out the angry chaos for a moment. Now take a deep breath and imagine a country you want to live in, a country you wish existed, a country where you'd feel truly at home . . .

That's what we asked a cross-section of Scottish society to do. (All sorts of people, except for politicians, because they already have plenty of opportunities to tell us what they think.) This extraordinary collection of ideas is what they imagined.

We believe it's time to take those imaginings seriously. Because if we're going to enact change, the first step is to imagine it. If we can't imagine a different way of being, if we can't imagine a different future, how can we reach escape velocity from an unbearable present?

Like so many of you, we have succumbed too often to rage and despair in recent times. We've seen battle-lines drawn where once we negotiated; vitriol and hatred dispensed where once we'd have listened and debated; fake news, deepfakes and barefaced lies where once we could believe. Too much of our political debate has shrunk to a nuance-free 280 characters. It's no surprise that we find ourselves pushed into polarised positions when we try to engage in that way.

This book is a revolt against all of that. This book is about hope.

There are plenty of voices that shout that imagination is the enemy of the real world, that imagination is for the artists, a luxury we can't afford in these times of austerity and cuts. But the fact that one of the first targets of austerity has been libraries reveals how subversive imagination really is. For libraries offer myriad possibilities. Where else can

you come into contact with so many alternative visions of the world, both utopian and dystopian? Libraries are dangerous and provocative places.

Our intention in putting this book together is to stimulate debate, not shouting matches. This book is not a manifesto, it is not a singular voice: reading through the contributions should be more akin to walking down the street, sitting on the bus or in the pub, eavesdropping on a number of conversations, rants, daydreams and hopes, rather than reading a neat or coherent agenda. We have tried to draw in voices from across our nation – geographically, socially, politically. The book is not aligned with any party-political position – indeed, we hope we can use some of these ideas to hold our future politicians' feet to the fire.

Just as a library contains books that we disagree with and others we love, there will be some pieces here that you agree with, and some that will make the steam come out of your ears. And this is exactly what we're hoping for. After all, true democracy is about making space to hear the many voices; it is about us encountering different views, debating them and then reflecting on our own position, rather than hearing only the most confident or the loudest or the best-funded. It is perhaps only by hearing some of those voices at odds with our own that we may begin to break down binary thinking and start to open up more connections and alliances.

We set our contributors a tall order: to 'Imagine a Country' in 500–800 words (or an illustrative alternative) in the space of a month. Those 500–800 words aren't much, but we hope (that word again!) that it will stimulate conversations and respectful interactions that will engage with the complexity of modern life. Not everyone we invited felt able to contribute, but we are full of admiration for those who took up the gauntlet. Some have chosen to address the big challenges we face, to think afresh and with huge ambition; others have chosen instead to focus on a very specific change they'd like to see us embrace.

It happened that we did most of the work on this book while temporarily attached to the University of Otago in Dunedin, New Zealand, which provided us with focused thinking time. Viewing Scotland from

'the Edinburgh of the South' gave us a critical distance. When so much of the everyday is similar, the differences are all the more striking and that gave us pause to consider how quite small changes can have a significant impact on people's lives.

Take one example. Free public toilets seem to be everywhere in New Zealand. Towns and cities are well provisioned, but so are small settlements, tourist sites and even roadside viewpoints. They are all clean and well stocked; they are free from vandalism.

Not so in the UK, where many public toilets have been closed. Where they still exist, most charge for entry. This might appear a trivial issue, but it's not. It affects most of us at one time or another, when reliable access to toilets can make all the difference – parents with young children, pregnant women, people with disabilities, older men, drunk people, menstruating women, homeless people . . . The lack of toilet provision impacts our comfortable use of public space and makes our towns and cities less welcoming.

Small thing, big impact.

And, finally, what do *we* want? We want to live in a society where value is not measured by narrow economic criteria but a wider understanding of contribution. We want to live in a society which does not turn its back on the vulnerable, and instead is one that seeks to help everyone to achieve their potential. And if this means those who can afford it pay more in tax, then they should see evidence that this is the price for living in a civilised society. Enacting some of the ideas in this book would certainly provide such evidence.

We also want to sing and dance, to laugh and to enjoy all Scotland has to offer.

The idea for this book emerged from conversations provoked by the Edinburgh International Book Festival's 2019 theme: 'We need new stories.'

This is the first chapter.

Val McDermid is a writer and broadcaster. Jo Sharp is a Professor of Geography at the University of St Andrews.

LEILA ABOULELA

Some countries have double the number of public holidays Scotland has. In Indonesia, where my family and I lived for a few years, there were seventeen holidays, some of which were more than one day. As expected of a country in which almost 90 per cent of the population are Muslims, there were the two Eid holidays – al-Fitr and al-Adha – Islamic New Year, the birthday (Mawlid) of the Prophet Muhammad, and celebration of his Night Journey (the Isra and Miraj). There was also Christmas, Easter and Good Friday; there was New Year's Day and Chinese New Year – that's now adding up to three new year's days per year! Hindu and Buddhist feast-days were also public holidays, as well as Labour Day. I loved all these holidays, especially when they came mid-week; my husband and children at home, the working week disrupted. There is no better way to celebrate diversity than by sharing each other's festivals. I would love Scotland to be the same. Fewer working days would enable us all to live better lives.

If religious holidays are not to everyone's taste, then how about secular ones? Let's make Valentine's Day a public holiday. Burns Night, Guy Fawkes, Midsummer's Day. If Scotland gains independence, will there be an Independence Day holiday? Imagine . . .

Holidays mean more rest and more togetherness; more precious time, more valuable hours. This great spinning world, let's slow it down, let's have a break. A break from the internet would be nice too. A relief from the news. A recess from advertising. We do not need to shop 24/7. We do not need to know the news every hour. We do not need

to be able to do every little thing on every single day of the week. For the sake of the climate, we can take time off from electricity, from heating, from travelling. Short pauses here and there. To catch our breath, to hear the birds, to see the stars, to listen to each other. To feel idle. There is nothing wrong with occasional idleness. Staring into space, thinking thoughts or thinking nothing, swinging on a hammock, sitting gazing into the flames. Our fingers need a rest, as do our eyes, our minds. Shopping has become the new oppression, as has acquiring likes on social media, the endless expenses of self-improvement, and keeping up with the latest celebrities. All this comes at the price of more drudgery, more hours spent earning, more days at work.

The four-day work week is not a fantasy. It has already been adopted in Germany and Denmark to some extent. Fewer working hours are better for our physical and mental health. The four-day work week would reduce pressure on the environment. A 2013 paper published in *Global Environmental Change* shows that countries with longer working hours consume more resources and emit more carbon.* Reduced working hours, they suggest, could contribute to sustainability by decreasing the environmental intensity of consumption patterns.

Research by the Trades Union Congress has found that UK full-time staff work almost two hours more than the EU weekly average. Yet staff in Denmark who worked fewer hours were more productive. Resting more and having adequate time for recreation improves the quality of the work we produce. By working fewer hours, we boost our output instead of reducing it.

Sadly, the reality in Britain is that many people are working longer hours or the same hours for less pay. Working harder to become poorer, working more to end up with less. Writing in *The Conversation*, economist David Spencer says: 'The continued force of consumerism has acted as a prop to the work ethic. Advertising and product innovation have created a culture where longer hours have been accepted as

* 'Could working less reduce pressures on the environment? A cross-national panel analysis of OECD countries, 1970–2007', K.W. Knight, E.A. Rosa, J.B. Schor, *Global Environmental Change*, 2013

normal, even while they have inhibited the freedom of workers to live well.'★

More public holidays – religious, secular or national – a reduction in the working week, time off from the internet, from the media, from travel and energy consumption, would reduce carbon footprint and give us more of what really matters.

Leila Aboulela's fifth novel, Bird Summons*, was shortlisted for the Saltire Society Scottish Fiction Book of the Year 2019.*

★ 'Four-day work week is a necessary part of human progress – here's a plan to make it happen', David Spencer, *The Conversation*, 2019

LIN ANDERSON

Travelling between my home village of Carrbridge and my workplace in Edinburgh over many years, I know every kilometre of the A9 very well. I also know all the views from the train and more recently the bus.

I first travelled the route north as a teenager when studying at Glasgow University, heading home to Carrbridge for an occasional weekend or holiday. The road itself is vastly improved. The trains sadly have shrunk in size to three coaches, whereas in former times they were much longer and all stopped at Carrbridge, allowing me a short walk to my old home. A bus used to meet the trains back then to transport travellers into the village, a half-mile away.

This dream, however, is not about improved roads and travel round the Highlands, although this is often on my mind. It is about the landscape we travel through as we head north. How over my lifetime it has changed, but not in the direction I had hoped for.

The saddest and most distressing part of the northward journey for me has to be passing through Drumochter Pass. Here we can clearly see bulldozed tracks scarring the hillsides, many of which come to an abrupt end, because they are going nowhere. They are there so that those who wish to kill grouse need not walk too far to do so. These gravelled roads which require no planning permission, along with huge swathes of burned heather exposing the underlying peat, are anything but natural.

These are the Killing Fields for driven-grouse shooting, which has exploded in recent years. Along with its dense plantations of non-native trees, where no human may walk and no bird lives or sings, Scotland

no longer resembles its true self. To discover that self, you must visit pockets of the old and protected Caledonian Forest at nearby Rothiemurchus or even, on a smaller scale, the woods surrounding Carrbridge.

Southwest Norway and Highland Scotland are very similar in climate, geology and landforms; but very different in modern land-use patterns and resulting landscapes. In the early twentieth century the region near Stavanger in Norway was almost completely deforested. It is now well wooded, mainly due to natural regeneration – a conscious and rewarding decision by government for the land and its population, both wild and human.

The truth is Scotland is not a natural wilderness but a man-made one. And what was made can be unmade, or remade. The difference can already be seen near Carrbridge. When crossing the Dava Moor to Forres, the landscape is now dotted with numerous naturally regenerating young pine trees.

Rewilding goes hand in hand with repopulation. Just as the natural covering was removed from the Highlands, so too were its people. In the new Scotland I dream that we would have a clear opportunity to change things. To revitalise the whole of Scotland's landscape, for the many, and not just the few. We can and will recreate a living landscape of which Scotland's people are an integral part.

Lin Anderson is a writer and screenwriter, best known for her series of forensic thrillers starring Dr Rhona MacLeod.

ALY BAIN

Welcome to Hamister, my country. Its name means 'Haven' in our ancient language. It is one of the most beautiful countries in the world, from its northerly islands to its rolling hills in the south. Hamister lies in the far north, surrounded by the sea, which can be wild, rough, treacherous and beautiful. The four seasons are reduced to just summer and winter. We are a small country but we believe small is good! People of Hamister are farmers and fishermen. We live in harmony with each other as we do with the abundance of wildlife that surrounds us. Our traditions and culture define who we are and play an important part in our everyday lives. In my country there is a fiddle in every house and not just as an ornament! The arts flourish and are viewed as an investment in our future instead of a throwaway subsidy. We believe our traditions and culture define who we are as a nation.

Every day in Hamister I see in our young people's faces a belief in their imagination and creativity. Young people who feel their ideas and talents are important and valued, who feel safe and healthy in their homes. Young people who feel connected in their families and communities and who feel it's OK to be a bit different, a bit insecure, but who have a belief that they will get to know and like who they truly are. Young people who can see value in the thinkers and artists among them and enjoy the company of all. Young people who feel they can engage in an education that helps them learn about themselves and their worlds with curiosity and tolerance, and who feel they are valued for who they are but also for what they can do. Young people who understand their cultural and historical narratives. The great thinkers,

scientists, writers, artists and musicians. Young people who travel and are happy to say, 'I come from Hamister.' Young people who dream in technology and technicolour, and believe they can create great things in the future, and who understand what it feels like to be taken care of by their country and how to take care of each other.

In Hamister all traces of feudalism have been wiped away. The ancient laws of my country are 'udal', not 'few-dal' – for the benefit of the population as a whole. Democratic courts decide any disputes over land or life regardless of wealth or religion. All schoolchildren have the opportunity to visit every part of their country as part of the curriculum. In this way they learn about the country and environment they live in and how precious they both are. We would like to remove all possible means of pollution from our cities as quickly as possible; we're aiming to make a start with car-free city centres. I haven't owned a car for years. I joined the Hamister Car Club and rent only when I need to.

Hamister takes its place on the world stage feeling confident and secure in its culture, history and individuality. It is progressive and confronts the problems facing the world in an honest and constructive way. The great thinkers and philosophers of my country are dedicated to contributing to a future for all. We have a national broadcaster that's fully independent and funded by the government to represent us with authenticity and courage. Up-and-coming directors, producers, writers and performers are allowed to flourish. In Hamister people are optimistic and hardly ever say, 'Och, it'll never work.' The arts provide the thinkers and performers of the future and are our country's ambassadors abroad.

There are two compulsory things in Hamister that can't be avoided. One is that you must have a sense of humour. People who fail to laugh at least three times each day can be sent to one of the humour schools scattered over the country. People are generally much happier after a few sessions with our happy humour teachers. The other is that every man, woman and child must learn to sail a boat. Our greatest Foreseer of ancient times predicted that one day a wealthy unstoppable force would invade our country and make it into a golf course, so we must be ready to evacuate at any moment.

Tradition is being created every day and reflects the society we live in. My country puts the health and welfare of its people first and foremost. Our elderly are taken care of and appreciated instead of being institutionalised and forgotten about. The family lives and works together for the good of all and is at the heart of society.

I would like every generation to produce the Hamister equivalent of Billy Connolly and Jimmy Reid. One to help us laugh and think well of ourselves and the other to keep our feet on the ground and our hands aff the bevvie.

Aly Bain, born 1946, is a Shetland fiddler who lives in Edinburgh.

NICK BARLEY

Dear Mum,

It was lovely to see you at the weekend. The journey back to Edinburgh was pretty uneventful: the monorail was a few seconds late leaving York because there was some kind of glitch with the electronic passport check – but otherwise we got home within the hour, and in plenty of time for the street party. I feel bad about being sceptical: it turned out to be quite fun and the neighbourhood bore (I call him the Pope) was preoccupied with being in charge of the barbecue, so I managed to avoid most of his pontificating.

Your brownies were devoured in a matter of minutes – although most of them, in all honesty, were truffled by Haseeb and Callum and that bunch of numpties from up the street. It was lovely to be able to have an offering for the organisers, even though I was straight off the monorail.

Oh, and I needn't have worried about the cat: Vita had been feeding him even though we'd forgotten it when we'd sketched out her work plan last week. She's been pretty amazing actually – miles better than the wet-drip Cadet who 'looked after' the house when we were away during the summer.

It was great to hear that your Cadet is working with you to sort out your garden as well as helping with the cooking. I know it's a bit weird at first, especially when you've been living by yourself for so many years, but I promise you'll quickly get over that feeling of being invaded by a stranger. I can imagine you tutting now, thinking I'm being too damn relentlessly positive about it. But honestly, the

Young Adult Social Service system has been working for over thirty years now up here in Scotland and it's changed things for the better in so many ways.

I'm not denying it had its teething problems – especially during the School Rebellion of 2024 when that whole generation of school leavers rejected the idea of a compulsory year of fully paid community work. The most ambitious people in that first cohort had the impression it would somehow get in the way of their careers, while the less motivated ones just balked at the idea of a year of shovelling other people's shit. But even the lazy ones soon realised that being a Social Cadet offered a lot more than that. And I guess it wasn't until the pensions crisis later that decade – and the genius *We Can Feed You* campaign – that kids started to see that it was either Social Service, or starvation for thousands of elderly people.

I know when you visited us last year you were amazed at the way the scheme has developed into so much more than just social care. When they introduced the Childcare Support and Healthcare divisions in the early 2030s, it meant not only that parents could finally get affordable nursery care, but also that the NHS crisis abated in a matter of months. When you get to that point down in York, you'll really feel the difference.

It's weird that Rose is already planning for her own Social Service year. She's been doing pretty well in her school work since the turn of the year but she's looking forward to getting some non-academic skills training once her exams are done. This term, she's spending Wednesday afternoons visiting the hospital where she'll be based. It's so much more than just running about getting cups of tea and toast for patients; she gets to shadow various health-care workers and it's going to make such a difference to her academic studies – if she manages to get the grades of course . . . But the great thing about Social Service is that she'll get skills credits that will count towards her university entrance assessment. Assuming she scores highly in her People-Facing Skills and her Organisational Skills modules, they'll count for the same as a couple

of Advanced Highers. And best of all from my perspective, good grades in her Socials mean she'll qualify for zero tuition fees. It's win-win for everyone.

Still, Rose is viewing the whole year ahead with a degree of adolescent petulance. A whole year of working four days a week for the Living Wage? And a further whole day each week when she's free to 'do culture'? Only someone as thrawn as Rose could be annoyed about that prospect . . . Bloody teenagers.

Anyway. Suffice it to say that you'll get used to your Cadet soon enough. Just please make sure you're not treating her like too much of a lackey. Don't forget it means you're allowed to stay in that lovely house rather than having to move into a care home!

Loads of love to you, Mum. And look forward to seeing you at Christmas.

Nick xx

Nick Barley is Director of the Edinburgh International Book Festival and a trustee of the Booker Prize Foundation.

DAMIAN BARR

Speak to me of my history. Lean in and tell me stories of the place where I was born and raised and whose name is right there on top of my birth certificate but of which I know so little.

Scotland was the stylised logo on the front of all my school jotters – it floated shorn of islands and chopped off the top of England, just as Mary lost her head. The heart of it was blown up big, as if a magnifying glass had been placed over it, and next to it was this text: Strathclyde Regional Council. Strathclyde seemed to be the biggest chunk of the country – which I did not yet think of as a country but simply as the place which contained Glasgow, where we went to see the Christmas lights, Motherwell, where we went for messages, and Newarthill, where everybody I knew and everybody I knew everything about lived. That I lived in Strathclyde and that it was on the front of the jotters my teachers gave to me – the jotters we were supposed to cover with wallpaper at the start of every term – made me feel important. That I could see the regional logo because we barely had enough wallpaper at home to cover the walls, never mind my jotters, made me feel ashamed.

I wrote almost nothing in those jotters about Newarthill, Motherwell, Glasgow or Strathclyde. History had happened elsewhere – on the battlefields of the Somme, on the *Mayflower*, on the moon. I knew about Henry VIII and could name all of his six wives but knew nothing of Margaret, brave little Maid of Norway who became queen at the age of two and was promptly betrothed to the son of Edward I, but who saw neither kingdom nor husband because she died aged seven on Orkney in September 1290. Mary Queen of Scots was a mad slag.

Robert the Bruce fought on a biscuit tin. Macbeth was a play. Shakespeare walks with me still. But Burns was just for supper. Castles were for tourists and the Highlands and Islands were for teuchters, whatever they were.

The Romans had been here. They left evidence of their superior heating engineering in Strathclyde Park – troughs dug for clay pipes traced the outline of the walls of a villa. When I first stepped down into them they came up to my shoulders. Now they're at my knees. The Vikings had also stopped by, which I knew when I looked up at my dad – all six foot six. Now we stand eye-to-eye.

When I was writing my own story, *Maggie & Me*, I stayed in a tower in the Borders. All the doors and walls felt weirdly off and after a while the owner, a friend, explained that the family who'd lived there for centuries, looting farms and switching sides, had been left-handed. They were reivers, and behind their foot-thick walls I finally felt safe enough to raid my own past. I knew how a man 200 years before would have held his sword, but I couldn't tell you what language he'd whispered sweet nothings in or what he knew of the contours of the low rolling hills about him.

So, speak to me of my history – start back when I was at school. I want to know it all, not just the stuff about the Tudors and London and the Industrial Revolution and Empire and Churchill. I want to know all that but I need to know all the rest too – there's got to be more. Help me fill my jotters with what was happening in Newarthill, in Motherwell, in Glasgow, in Strathclyde – in Alba, Scotia, the Caledonia the Vikings raided and the Romans built their walls around. Tell me all the stories about how and who we were.

Speak to me of my history so I might take my place in our future.

Damian Barr is the author of Maggie & Me *and* You Will Be Safe Here.

ALAN BISSETT

There are many, many problems with the way in which societies around the world have been organised. Even naming them would elicit a sigh and a roll of the eyes, so accustomed are we to breathing a vague, gaseous cloud of despair. Capitalism has failed, globally, but has also apparently conquered all enemies. We know instinctively that something's wrong but we don't know how to fix it.

As a result, individuals – atomised and battered on the winds of economic fate – have huddled into the only thing which they feel gives them agency and meaning: tribes. Across a spectrum of identities – whether gender, ethnic, national, sectarian, political or religious – people have picked their side, their righteousness and prejudice multiplied many times over by the internet. People have stopped listening to each other, so engaged are they in furious ideological wars in their minds which entail the final defeat of a perceived enemy. It seems that everyone appears to be guilty of this, to one degree or another. Lord knows, I have been.

The question is what to do about it.

In previous lives I imagined a socialist transformation of society, tying people together in a shared economic project, or a cultural revolution whereby we all read our way to enlightenment and defined ourselves in our imaginations.

Now I think, to borrow a phrase from Alastair McIntosh's book *Soil and Soul*, we need to dig where we stand. We need to go back to the source of our humanity: place.

What do I mean by this?

Each of us – or, rather, those of us fortunate enough to have homes

– lives somewhere. We all open our front door on a city, a town, a village, a street, a road, a close or a tenement in a physical location where other humans live. Yet how many of us feel a real sense of connection to our actual neighbours? We often pay lip service to 'community', but the vast majority of our daily dialogue is with those in our workplaces, or our social media feeds, people who live dozens, maybe hundreds of miles away. We consume hours of national news and televised stories dreamt up by committees in media centres far away. The people who live a few doors from us only get a cursory nod in the street. This is why we don't see the homeless person inhabiting the same space as 'one of us'. They are objects to navigate on the way to somewhere else we're being paid to be.

This is how our tribalism is different from that of ancient societies: theirs was local. It was specific to a place, a small place at that. People made their truest connections to those into whose eyes they could actually look and in whom they were obliged to invest trust because the survival of the tribe depended upon it. But globalisation means our tribes are now vast, imaginary networks which stretch across time and space, encompassing people we'll never meet, but who embody 'our' values. Paradoxically, this geographical stretching of our networks has led to constellations of similarity and fewer encounters with difference. These 'echo chambers' are, perhaps, an inevitable effect of the technology available to us.

Regrettably we've come to treat with suspicion those who physically surround us. Even traditional spaces in which conversation would once have been expected – public transport, for example – find us disappearing into our private worlds of headphones and noise. People in pubs turn their eyes away from each other and focus on BT Sport. Couples, families, friends stare into phones at restaurant tables.

Of course there are situations in which we should be careful of strangers. Some people are dangerous. And I'm well aware there is more peril for women than men in a random conversation with a stranger.

Nevertheless, what we have lost outweighs this.

What we need is to think of ourselves as occupying a country of

thousands of small locations, full of people who contribute something *to that place*: volunteering for the toddlers' group, organising a local club night, checking in on the old people, helping out in the charity shop, taking part in the gala day, *starting a gala day*, volunteering for an arts festival, going on litter-picking walks, and slowly, slowly learning the faces, names and backgrounds of the people with whom we *actually* share a life.

You don't have to agree with everything they say. You just have to accept them for who they are, and give them the chance to be their best self. Hopefully they will do the same for you. If we must have tribes, let them be porous, welcoming, based on willingness to contribute in a meaningful way to the people with whom we share space.

It's how human beings thrived in the past, and the only way we'll survive the future.

Alan Bissett is an award-winning novelist, playwright and performer who grew up in Falkirk and now lives in Renfrewshire.

CHRIS BROOKMYRE

To build a better future for a country, you need to look to the new generations that will populate it, and I believe one of the most valuable things we could do for them would be to introduce the teaching of philosophy from primary-school age.

One of the most corrosive effects of social media and the self-curation of our news consumption that it has facilitated has been the 'footballisation' of our political discourse. People who might otherwise have expressed little interest in an issue (and who often retain a lack of curiosity over the complex detail) are nonetheless encouraged to take sides, and to regard politics as a zero-sum game in which the other team must be defeated at all costs. Any amount of misbehaviour, dishonesty and hypocrisy is excused as long as it is in the service of your side's success; indeed, getting away with terrible behaviour is in itself viewed as a form of victory, a demonstration of strength.

Through philosophy, children would learn to take the tribalism out of discourse. It teaches them how to think, not what to think: how to evaluate ideas according to their merits, logic and insight, as opposed to the adversarial instinct that causes us to defend ideas because we feel personally invested in them or tribally identified with them. It would be invaluable if our children could learn to confront challenges to their arguments without the fear of losing face, and to understand that it is not a sign of weakness or surrender to change your mind on the basis of new information or changing circumstances.

And if all of this sounds implausibly idealistic, it may surprise you to learn that it has been tried before, on opposite sides of the globe.

In Australia in 1997, Buranda State School in Brisbane introduced a philosophy programme involving structured debates addressing philosophical questions the kids themselves had come up with. The children's academic test results improved considerably and were maintained or improved upon in the years that followed. However, perhaps more significant was the impact on social behaviour.

According to a report on the programme:

> The respect for others and the increase in individual self-esteem generated in the community of inquiry have permeated all aspects of school life. We now have few behaviour problems (and we do have some difficult students). Students are less impatient with each other, they are more willing to accept their own mistakes as a normal part of learning and they discuss problems as they occur . . . A visiting academic commented: 'Your children don't fight, they negotiate.' Visitors to the school are constantly making reference to the 'feel' or 'spirit' of the place. We believe it's the way our children treat each other.

A similar experiment was carried out right here at home, with equal success. In 2001–2002, a number of primary schools in Clackmannanshire, including ones in deprived areas, took part in an experiment whereby eleven- to twelve-year-olds were given one hour a week of philosophy teaching. The study involved a wide range of tests and was observed in comparison with a control group of schools with no such philosophy programme. The study found that, after one year, the incidence of children supporting opinion with evidence doubled, but the control classes remained unchanged. There was evidence that children's self-esteem and confidence rose markedly. Class ethos and discipline improved noticeably. All classes improved significantly in verbal, non-verbal and quantitative reasoning, while no control class changed. Children were assessed as being more intelligent (by an average of 6.5 IQ points) after one year on the programme.

Most significantly, those benefits were retained by the pupils when

they moved on to secondary, even though no such philosophy teaching followed them to their new schools.*

We are living in what might be called the Information Age, bombarded with data, with ideas and opinions as never before. I imagine a country whose future generations are equipped to process this information, to evaluate it and to reach valid conclusions. Most importantly, they would learn how to respond when someone else reaches *different* conclusions.

Chris Brookmyre is the author of more than twenty crime and SF novels, as well as writing historical fiction with his wife, Marisa Haetzman, under the pseudonym Ambrose Parry.

* For more detail on the Buranda and Clackmannanshire experiments, seek out *The War For Children's Minds* by Stephen Law (Routledge 2006).

TRESSA BURKE

Every day I hold fast to a vision of a better country – one that *is* possible and offers hope for over a million disabled Scots. I witness disabled people moving from hopelessness to becoming civic leaders, inspiring and working with others to create positive changes. I see people contributing to families, communities and wider society – with just a little bit of support. And I have the privilege of being a civic leader alongside them in an organisation run by, for and with disabled people, with the biggest groundswell of disabled members in Europe: 'Nothing About Us Without Us' is our mantra and echoes disabled-people-led organisations (DPOs) across Europe and internationally.

It should shock and shame us that the UN has declared the lives of disabled people in the UK 'a human catastrophe'. This is due to the perfect storm of welfare reform and austerity measures at the hands of the UK government, measures that are seen by the UN as being driven by a 'commitment to achieving radical social re-engineering' (Annual Report, UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, 2018). The erosion of rights and removal of protection has prompted further cuts to local authority services and community supports, including social care which is fundamental for disabled people to live their lives and fulfil their potential.

Disabled people are amongst the worst hit by austerity and make up almost half of those in poverty. They are more likely to be unemployed, in insecure employment, or economically inactive, as well as being less likely to have formal qualifications. Disabled people experience health inequalities and poorer life outcomes all round. The Office of National Statistics reveals that their life expectancy is shorter and

suicide rates are higher. Loneliness and isolation can compound this inequality, creating a sense of despair and hopelessness.

None of this is inevitable. It is all a result of political choices. Disabled people need not bear the brunt of austerity. Instead we should use the new tax-raising powers available in Scotland to better support our communities. There is a glimmer of hope in that the Scottish government have already taken steps to mitigate austerity, and we have a First Minister committed to creating a 'Wellbeing Economy' which will focus on what matters to people rather than solely economic growth.

Our collective vision is for disabled people to have the same freedom and choices to participate as other citizens, and the support needed. This vision is not a pipe dream; it is part of a collection of rights already enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of Disabled People, and is called Independent Living. It's about not having to do things by yourself, but rather, having the support needed to live an ordinary life.

What matters to disabled people is being included, having a sense of meaning and purpose, knowing our rights and having these met. What matters is playing the lead role in our own lives instead of being a bystander. Disabled people frequently tell me that it also matters that we are treated with humanity and with kindness and compassion – but not as a replacement for fundamental rights: more, as a demonstration of them. It matters that we are able to participate and, just as importantly, to make contributions to our families, communities and wider society.

To ensure the involvement of disabled people in realising the vision of Independent Living we must support disabled people's aspirations and help them grow so that they can realise their potential and dare to dream about what is possible. Not to do this risks losing their amazing contributions to our country. I have witnessed tremendous strength, courage, resilience and a sense of collective and mutual support between disabled people who have dared to dream. This has been supported by accessible peer-learning, capacity-building and consciousness-raising which enables disabled people to have fun, build skills and meet others

in the same boat; and for many to continue their education examining and deconstructing their inequality and oppression, understanding their rights, taking control of their situation and planning for change individually and collectively.

Organisations led by disabled people have an essential role in making this vision a reality. But everyone in our country has a part to play. A wider conversation is now needed with Scotland's people so that they better understand the barriers facing disabled people and the reality of our lives, before deciding what kind of society we want to be.

Tressa Burke is a disability activist and equalities campaigner. She was a founder member of the Glasgow Disability Alliance and has been Chief Executive Officer since 2006.