

# Whatever happened to the dream of social justice?

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*The Herald, Saturday, 8<sup>th</sup> March 2003*

*Recent attempts by the Scottish Executive to empower communities through Social Inclusion Partnerships have been hijacked by political placemen, self-interested professionals and old-style talking shops.*

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## **New focus on social regeneration**

Scotland has seen many initiatives in the area of social justice, and a host of new and re-engineered agencies and quangos spending public money to create a Scotland “*where everyone matters*”. Social Inclusion Partnerships (SIPs), established in May 1998, have been a crucial part of this. They have attempted to pioneer a shift away from a *bricks and mortar* focus and physical regeneration to wider ideas of social regeneration by developing new ways of working, using public money and involving communities. There are 48 SIPs in Scotland, 34 area-based and 14 thematic, with one-quarter of them in Glasgow. Together they spend a total of £120 million a year which is not very much in a Scottish Executive budget of £20 billion particularly given the hopes and aspirations invested in them. It is also not much compared with the previous failed Tory Scottish Office “*New Life for Urban Scotland*”, which focused £80 million into four priority areas.

## **Still behaving in old ways and holding onto the money**

SIPs were meant to provide a new start after decades of failed initiatives in poor areas. The £120 million per annum was designed to act as a catalyst for other agencies and money from the public, voluntary and private sectors. It was intended to bring joined-up solutions, rather than the fragmented practice of numerous agencies: local authority, Scottish Executive, Westminster, and numerous quangos. Sadly, the reality

has been that for all the rhetoric of partnership, professionals and bureaucrats have not begun working together in new ways to support communities. Instead, they have behaved in the traditional bureaucratic-officialdom way and sat on their budgets and kept their money to themselves. This has meant that the impact of the SIPs has been severely limited.

### **The unrepresentative nature of SIP boards**

For all the rhetoric of finding new ways of working SIPs have been more top-down in practice. A crucial issue has been the unrepresentative nature of SIP boards. These are generally stuffed with the institutional clutter and bodies that dominate Scottish public life: education, health, enterprise boards, local authorities, MPs, and MSPs. There have been accusations of boards being dominated by “*Labour placemen*”, and as a result of concerns, a *Register of Interests* was introduced by the Scottish Executive in March 2002 – three years after SIPs were set up.

### **Lack of community representation**

Another concern has been the degree of community involvement another favourite buzz-phrase. According to the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisation’s directory of SIPs, of the 48, only three have a majority of community representatives on their boards. Several have none at all. This has seen tension and conflict between community activists and local campaigners and SIP staff and board members about who speaks for the community, and who has the best interests of the community at heart.

### **The domination of self-interested professionals**

Launched with great hope and filled with the rhetoric of change, SIPs have become part of the professional class of networked state Scotland – that group of salaried, sometimes well-remunerated professionals who know how to talk in the way that they are seen as *the champions of the people and the down-trodden*, but are really looking after their own interest and advancement.

### **Talking the talk and imposing solutions**

Communities have expressed dismay in several SIPs about most senior posts going to people outside an area, thus restricting one of the ways SIPs could contribute towards regeneration. SIP boards and the way they have involved communities represents a very narrow notion of public Scotland. And while they have been good at talking the talk, in reality they have continued the tradition of imposing solutions, of assuming professionals know best, and being part of the Fabian paternalist palliative tradition which is not about giving people the right to run their communities as they see fit.

### **Poverty and disadvantage are complex issues**

The picture of poverty and disadvantage is a complex one, but most people in poverty in Scotland do not live in a SIP. Glasgow has 16 of the 20 most deprived areas in

Scotland and 12 SIPs. How does one deal with areas that are *middling* through and that have both problems and deprivation, but are not perhaps among the worst? Areas for example such as Govanhill where there was controversy when the Council shut the local swimming pool, fuelling fears that the area was being left by national and local services to decline. People in Govanhill, sandwiched between the Gorbals, which has SIP status and Castlemilk, which has a local partnership, felt abandoned. Do areas have to become *problem areas* before support kicks in?

### **Themed SIPs have improved people's lives**

While there have been concerns over area-based SIPs duplicating existing services, there have been successes. Themed SIPs, which bring together agencies and individuals on a specific issue, have broken new ground. Examples of pioneering work here include Big Step – working with young people; the Glasgow Anti-Racist Alliance; and the Routes out of Prostitution initiative. These projects have brought together people who might not normally get together, done something different and improved people's lives.

### **How can we bring about change?**

Change is coming to SIPs, with their administration and monitoring now being undertaken by the quango - Communities Scotland. However, we need to do more than tinker with their structure, we need to learn from their track records. In a country as scarred by poverty and injustice as Scotland is, how can we bring about change?

Can governments and public agencies really deliver social justice, or do we need to think about different ways? How can we capture the enthusiasm, drive and innovation that exists in communities and give people the capacity to change things themselves? Perhaps part of the answer is in realising that government is as much a part of the problem as the solution.

### **Source:**

The Herald, Saturday 8<sup>th</sup> March 2003: [www.theherald.co.uk](http://www.theherald.co.uk)

Gerry Hassan's latest book is Anatomy of the New Scotland, published by Mainstream, priced £20.