

FRIENDS OF THE SCOTSMAN

Isolationism is not the answer to EU problems

A shared heritage and future goals bind us to the EU, says Irene Oldfather



I was not especially surprised to read the recent conclusions of Hansard Society Annual Audit of Public Attitudes to Politics which noted that "Scots were considerably more interested in and knowledgeable of politics compared to the rest of the UK population".

This augurs well for the upcoming EU referendum. Scottish people will want to make an informed choice on 23 June, free from the rhetoric of the tabloid media. The problem that they face is that both "in" and "out" camp, can present valid and conflicting statistical evidence to support their respective cases which can be convincing and confusing in equal measure.

As former chair of the Scottish Parliament's European and External Relations Committee and a representative on the European Economic and Social Committee, I do admit to an intuitive but not blinding bias. My conclusion is better in than out.

Rather than present a plethora of facts and figures, a recent EESC conference in Manchester, asked speakers to reflect on What Matters to You?

What matters to me is the principle of a social Europe where economic progress can support social progress as a useful practice model that resonates well with the ethos of the third sector. Improving living and working conditions, reducing inequalities, providing opportunity for young people, social and geographic mobility, treating our older people and our more vulnerable people with dignity and respect underpin much of the current European agenda.

The Health and Social Care Alliance Scotland (the ALLIANCE) 2 Million Expert Voices election manifesto aspires to much of the above. Europe is a place where we can find common ground and common cause.

The European Economic and Social Committee of which I am a member is a bridge between civil society and Europe. It is a meeting place where the pragmatism and innovation of people and communities can be showcased across Europe. A recent report to the Dutch presidency on fighting poverty highlighted the Alliance's National Link Worker Programme as a vital

tool in improving outcomes in health and wellbeing for vulnerable people in some of our most deprived communities.

The Third Sector has a legitimate role in articulating and advocating a strong voice for disadvantaged groups. It can bring an independent perspective to European Policy debates and the opportunity to work at pan-European level has added significant weight to many initiatives. The EU's support for action to combat discrimination based on disability, age, religion, ethnic group was the result of over 400 organisations from across Europe coming together to make the case – social protections which in Scotland and across the UK we value.

As well as the right not to be discriminated against on the basis of age, gender, religion or disability, it is through the EU that we enjoy maternity and paternity leave, the right to paid holidays, the right not to have to work for more than 48 hours a week.

This is not what matters to everyone in this debate. There will be those who see these rules as burdens on business rather than principles of human decency. That is why the question What Matters to You? is important to consider as you reflect on how to vote.

Europe is not without its flaws – it does need to change, adapt, improve and modernise. Increased transparency and flexibility is important. We should be able to ensure a flexible geometry that allows member states to be involved at a pace that best suits. One size does not have to fit all.

We have now been in the EU for over 40 years and the choice is integration or isolation: looking to the future or anchoring to a past that no longer exists. The nations and regions of Europe have a shared heritage as well as their own identity and, with that, a commitment to democracy and equality. Whatever the challenges, in those shared values lie our greatest strength.

● Irene Oldfather, member of the UK delegation to the EESC



Choosing baby's sex is a wider debate



Rather than focusing on one couple's decision, it would be better to examine the overall ethics, says Emily Murtagh

The internet was abuzz a few weeks back with the story of American singer, John Legend, and his wife, model Chrissy Teigen. After years of difficulty conceiving, they are finally having a baby using in vitro fertilisation (IVF – where the egg and sperm are combined outside the body).

Millions of babies are born each year by IVF, so what was so different about their pregnancy? The difference was that they chose to select the gender of their child and they decided to have a girl.

When John and Chrissy underwent IVF, a number of embryos were created, then using a special technique, the embryos' gender was tested with only a female embryo being selected for implantation.

In this process, the other embryos created are either frozen for later use, as is John and Chrissy's intention, or discarded. Chrissy shared this in an interview and a rather heated discussion on Twitter ensued on the ethics of sex selection.

Chrissy spoke of her desire to have a daughter first, which was based, primarily, on her perception of the future relationship between her husband and her daughter-to-be. "Let's put in the girl! I think I was most excited and allured by the fact that John would be the best father to a little girl. That excited me; the thought of seeing him with a little girl. I think he deserves that bond. But John definitely is very lucky to have a little girl."

It seems safe to say that these kinds of secret hopes are held in various forms by most prospective parents. These desires arise out of a certain

perception of what a particular gender brings to a family dynamic. But by paying to achieve this there is an emotional and financial investment, not just in having a child, but having a certain type of child.

We have taken leaps and bounds towards gender equality, but sex selection may seek to highlight distinctions and plays into cultural and social notions of what it means to be a male or female child. It may also place unfair, unspoken expectations on the child to adhere to those ideas, given the lengths that the parents have gone to select him or her.

Following from Chrissy's quotes, what does it mean to choose a child, and to choose a particular child? The language of this becomes an issue as it is a parent-focused rather than a child-focused statement. Parental desire or preference is the immediate motivation. On a deeper level, the parent-child relationship is held as the ultimate example of unconditional acceptance between humans. Thus, it can be asked whether allowing this level of choice goes against this value? If you are making a choice between two supposedly equal things, can you really say that they remain equal in this process?

When a couple makes a choice such as this, it represents a trend, a social idea of 'good'. In isolation it feels relatively harmless that they have decided to have a girl rather than a boy, but what if Chrissy had said that she wanted a family of five boys because she thought they would have an easier life than girls or if they felt like they should just have girls, as an act of rebellion against the patriarchal



society that has historically put girls in second place? When does their desire become a problem?

Our culture is essentially an individualistic one, and it would appear that there is a need to recognise how the sum total of many small individual decisions and desires shapes a society and its values.

This is an issue that is observable in other cultures where sex ratios have

become as warped as having 120 males to every 100 females. While gender selective abortions are not just illegal but abhorred in most cultures, this does not stop them from being a common reality. In India alone, ten million girls have disappeared before they were born, or just after, within the past twenty years. This speaks volumes on the value that is placed on the female child in these

contexts. Choice is a powerful thing. Berating Chrissy and John for making the choice, when it was presented to them, seems a little unhelpful. Genuinely examining the clinics that provide this choice, the legislation that permits it, and a culture that does not holistically question it seems a more useful endeavour.

● Emily Murtagh, Research Associate, Scottish Council on Human Bioethics

↑ Chrissy Teigen and John Legend have chosen to have a girl



How education is helping tackle effects of climate change in Bangladesh

A Holyrood-funded project has made a difference to villagers, writes May East

Sustainability educators, community leaders, permaculture growers, climate change academics, ecovillage practitioners, environmental journalists and national government representatives gathered recently in the Bangladeshi capital Dhaka to discuss how to address the impact of climate change in the Southeastern coastal areas of Bangladesh.

The Conference Building Capacity and Empowering Communities focused on the lessons learned from a project – led by Bangladesh Association for Sustainable Development, Gaia Education and CIFAL Scotland – addressing the vulnerabilities caused by climate change in the Khulna and Bagerhat districts of the Delta. Funded by the Scottish Government, the three-year project – recently extended for a further year – has been work-

ing in 42 villages to strengthen their agro-ecological productivity while empowering women to improve their livelihoods.

Bangladesh is considered one of the most climate-vulnerable countries in the world; it has experienced frequent extreme weather phenomena over the past decade, particularly in the coastal areas where typhoons, flooding and storm surges are having a devastating impact.

Last September the United Nations General Assembly adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as a universal and transformative development strategy. The 2030 Agenda commits every nation to 'achieving sustainable development in its three dimensions – economic, social and environmental – in a balanced and integrated man-

ner'. Although there is global commitment to this integrated sustainability agenda, the mechanics of how we achieve this integration has yet to be defined at national levels. The new Global Goals present an unprecedented opportunity for Bangladesh to lead its own development towards middle-income status.

Addressing United Nations General Assembly last year, Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina stated: 'to deliver on the SDGs, robust global cooperation is critical'. This project demonstrates how this can be done. By bringing sustainability designers, agro-ecologists and villagers together in partnership, we were able to better understand their predicament and transform it through critical reflection and regenerative action. By initially working with community leaders in ecovillage and permac-

ulture design we were able to impact almost 5,000 residents in 42 target villages of the region. These leaders have gone on to apply their learning through small-scale integrated farming in their homestead gardens and community self-reliance projects like fisheries, composting, horticulture and vermiculture. The project has also raised awareness on climate adaptation techniques and adapted homes to ensure villagers are less vulnerable to the constant threat of tidal floods and cyclones.

Organic agricultural practices have generated significantly higher yields compared to previous years using agrochemicals, a benefit which has enabled the villagers not only to secure their own needs but also to sell in local markets, enhancing their livelihoods and strengthening the community resilience. The first organ-

ic shop in the whole Delta was recently opened in Banishanta market to channel the excess produce of the communities. In the opening day the community group in charge of the shop was delighted to count 515 Takas at the end of a busy market day.

The most powerful part of the Dhaka conference was the testimonies from the villagers who demonstrated how the project had given their communities a solid foundation for a robust, diverse and flexible food system.

● May East, Chief Executive Gaia Education



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