



# Scottish Socialist Party

## All-Members' Bulletin

crisis in the party

# the fight for the truth

**JULY 2006** and Israel has launched a series of murderous air attacks against Lebanon. Rivers of blood continue to flow through the streets of Baghdad and other Iraqi cities.

In Afghanistan the Taliban is back in business. In Africa, one year after the extravagant promises of the G8 leaders to end world poverty, nothing has changed for the poorest people of the planet.

In the UK, the Blair government has swung so far to the right that even the Tory Party has given up trying to compete. The Lib Dems, under new leader, Menzies Campbell, are going nowhere.

In Scotland, the old order is crumbling. Polls show there is now a pro-independence majority in Scotland. The SNP look set to become the biggest party at Holyrood after 2007. The break-up of the British state looks a more realistic prospect than at any time in the past 300 years.

By rights, the SSP should now be preparing to emerge as a major force in Scottish politics. But instead of looking forward to spectacular advances in next year's Holyrood and council elections, the party is now on the brink of destruction.

**For 20 months the party has not put in writing the situation regarding Tommy Sheridan's resignation as national convener.**

**Now the court case is over, Alan McCombes, national policy and press coordinator, has prepared this article to ensure that party members hear the true situation from the party.**

**Along with this members' bulletin, you will find a copy of the Executive Committee minutes of 9 November 2004. At the end of this meeting there were 19 people in attendance who all agreed that Tommy should be asked to resign. The following members, who were at the meeting can verify that Tommy admitted to attending Cupids Club in Manchester and that he intended to lie about this: Carolyn Leckie, Jo Harvie, Felicity Garvie, Colin Fox, Catriona Grant, Rosie Kane, Keith Baldassara, Allan Green, Frances Curran, Richie Venton, Steven Nimmo, Alan McCombes, Barbara Scott, Allison Kane and Kevin McVey.**

Tommy Sheridan is today £200,000 richer. His reputation as a clean-cut, whiter-than-white pillar of decency has been restored by seven people on a jury in Edinburgh. His halo back in place, Tommy has declared his return as con-

venor of the SSP.

On the face of it, and from a distance, this might appear like a victory for the SSP and for socialism. But there was no possible outcome of this trial that could have had anything other than disastrous

consequences for the SSP and the cause of socialism in Scotland. The trial could even spell the death knell for a party which was founded on clean socialist principles. It could set back the cause of socialism by years if not decades.

In order to win his case, Tommy Sheridan openly denounced 11 honourable men and women from the SSP, who have between them centuries of political struggle behind them, as perjurers. These people, he declared, were responsible for the "mother of all stitch-ups".

Whatever the intentions of the Court of Session jury, these 11 people, and others, now stand condemned as perpetrators of a monstrous political crime. We are also accused - and in effect have been found guilty - of serious criminal charges which could lead to long term prison sentences.

Those accused cannot remain silent, because to say nothing would be an admission of guilt. We now have no option but to fight to clear our name. And to clear our name, we need to bring out every relevant piece of information.

From a scratch to the danger of gangrene, says an old proverb. The nightmare that has engulfed the SSP in recent months began with a few mundane lies. But over weeks and months, the deception escalated out of control. Tommy Sheridan might today be hailed as a hero by sections of the media.

So too was Jeffrey Archer when he won his defamation case back in 1987. But Archer was eventually exposed as a liar, a fraud and forger.

Tommy Sheridan may well be re-elected as convenor of the SSP. That's up to the membership. That is democracy. But voters, like juries, make mistakes. The brutal fact of the matter is that Tommy Sheridan is now a walking, talking time-

bomb who could be blown up at any time in the future.

There is no question that individual leaders can at times play a decisive role in politics. Nor is there any disputing the charisma and talent of Tommy Sheridan, whose media and oratorical skills were vital in establishing the SSP as a credible force in Scottish politics.

However, every individual has strengths and weaknesses, qualities and flaws. There are times when the strengths and qualities of individuals prevail, but then new circumstances arise - and the weaknesses and flaws are propelled to the fore.

It is a tragic fact that individuals who have played an outstanding role in the socialist movement can end up playing an obstructive and even destructive role. Derek Hatton, for example, was a talented and charismatic figurehead of the Liverpool City Council struggle against Thatcher in the 1980s. Later, as the struggle subsided, Derek's personal and political weakness caused problems for the socialist left, to the point where a breach became inevitable. Derek is now a successful DJ in his native city.

For a period of time in the mid-1980s and into the 1990s, Arthur Scargill was the hero of Britain's mining communities and the scourge of the political establishment. Thousands would pack meetings the length and breadth of the UK to hear his powerful oratory. Yet today the man who once inspired millions presides over a burnt-out sect of a political party, a cult based around his increasing egotistical personality.

Whatever may have happened over the past few years, Tommy Sheridan deserves recognition for the outstanding historical role he has played, from the Poll Tax battles of the late '80s and early '90s through to electoral success of the SSP

a decade later. Tommy was an outstanding figurehead for the SSP, eloquently promoting the cause of an independent socialist Scotland, as well as range of specific policies.

But neither the anti-Poll Tax movement, Scottish Militant Labour, the Scottish Socialist Alliance nor the SSP were ever one-man bands. Many people played a less visible, but similarly vital role in developing the influence, the structures, the strategy, and the politics of the SSP.

Tommy was essentially the front man for socialism in Scotland, the talented striker of the movement. But without the midfielders, the defenders, the coach, the goalkeeper, Tommy could have achieved nothing.

Nonetheless, it is also true that his talents were indispensable in putting the SSP on the political map of Scotland. His oratorical powers and media skills were harnessed to powerful effect, particularly between 1999 and 2003 when Tommy was the sole Scottish Socialist MSP.

Yet there is a fatal dividing line between utilising charisma and descending into the corrupt cult of the Great Leader. It is ironic that platforms that claim to stand on the traditions of anti-Stalinism and Trotskyism have been the most abject in their adherence to the philosophy of "my leader right or wrong".

In what can only be interpreted as a desperate bidding war to ingratiate themselves to Tommy Sheridan, the two London-controlled platforms in the party, the SW and the CWI platform jostled with each other to win Tommy's favour to the point where they became putty in his hands.

Taking as their starting point the fact that Tommy has been a popular public leader, these two groups, plus others, decided his standing was so indispensable to the socialist move-

ment that his reputation had to be defended at all costs, by whatever means necessary, including lying, deception, fraud and character assassination.

Star-struck by fame and celebrity, they have elevated Tommy Sheridan into a superhero whose public image is so important to the future of socialism that it is legitimate to destroy the reputations and the privacy of many others to protect that fake image. In essence, it is the Orwellian notion that some are more equal than others.

It is an elitist and politically corrupt philosophy. It flows from an almost childlike belief that the destiny of socialism in Scotland rests entirely on the shoulders of one charismatic personality.

Yes, Tommy Sheridan had come to personify the SSP in the public eye. It is precisely for that reason that his behaviour was reckless to the point of irresponsibility. His actions and subsequent court case have seriously undermined the toil and sweat of thousands of others who have invested vast amounts of time, effort and money over the years to create a credible socialist party in Scotland.

But those who fear that without Tommy Sheridan Scottish socialism is dead in the water are profoundly mistaken. They have swallowed hook, line and sinker the cynical and superficial analysis of those mainstream political commentators who cannot conceive that tens of thousands of people in Scotland vote SSP because they actually support the politics of socialism.

Clearly, Tommy has been a key figurehead of the movement and a powerful messenger. But it is patronising and insulting to the 150,000 plus people who have voted for the SSP over the years to write them off as nothing more than

a Tommy Sheridan fan club.

Low paid workers, young people, pensioners, students, council tenants, lone parents and others who are engaged in a daily struggle to get by tend to take politics more seriously than they would a Big Brother or Pop Idol vote. Their political allegiance is not a fashion choice. And for the mass of SSP voters the message is bigger than the messenger.

The Sheridan versus News Group libel case has opened up a sharp divide within the party, that is indisputable. The divide, contrary to the simplistic demagoguery of Tommy is not about whether we should stand on the side of a socialist, or on the side of Rupert Murdoch.

Nor is this a divide over policy. It is a divide between those on one side who believe in the primacy of politics and ideas, and, on the other side, those who believe personalities are all-important. It is a battle of substance over image, and of socialist egalitarianism over the cult of the individual.

It is a divide that is above and beyond political programme and policy, between those who believe that socialist politics has to be based on ethics and morality, and those who believe in the pursuit of electoral success by any means necessary.

On a much bigger stage, the same kind of battle has been fought out over the past few years inside the Brazilian Workers Party (PT). Under the charismatic leadership of the massively popular figure of Lula, the party took power in 2002.

Yet the hopes of millions have been shattered by the performance of Lula in power and the exposure of widespread corruption within the Workers Party. The party apparatus justified its turn to neo-liberalism and its involvement in systematic corruption on the grounds that Lula was so important, so popular, and so indispensable

that his position had to be defended come hell or high water.

One local leader traced the roots of the Brazilian Workers Party crisis back to the party's infatuation with their leader: "Its midnight and Lula says: 'look at the sun'. Everyone around him says: 'Yes look at the sun'. Then someone says: 'But its midnight - there is no sun' and they're treated as the enemy within."

That has been the psychology of some sections of the SSP in recent months. Some party members have believed Tommy and supported Tommy because they want to believe in a Messiah.

A few years ago, the CWI issued a press release denouncing Tommy Sheridan as a "neo-Stalinist" because of his support for Cuba. This was an absurd and unjustifiable attack. Yet ironically, the CWI and others, including especially the SWP, have today bought into a concept of socialism which contains disturbing elements of Stalinism.

In the 1930s the choice before the Communist movement was presented as either for Stalin, or for Hitler. Either for the GPU (later renamed the KGB), or for the Gestapo. Either for the Soviet Union, or for fascism. This was backed by hysterical demagoguery and vicious character assassination of all dissidents. In the frenzied conditions of the 1930s, it was also backed up by mass violence, terror and torture.

Conspiracy theories were concocted purporting to prove that old Bolsheviks were in the pay of Hitler, and had plans to carry out mass murder by poisoning the Soviet Union's water supply.

Europe's left intelligentsia - the artists, writers and academics - overwhelmingly sided with Stalin against the dissident left, even during the Moscow Trials when grotesque confessions were

extracted from broken individuals. The cultural elite had been mesmerised by the power and charisma of Stalin, and were convinced he was the only hope for socialism. They believed what they wanted to believe.

In comparison to these events, the troubles of the SSP are trivial and the behaviour of Tommy Sheridan petty and pathetic. Yet events in the SSP in the past few months have revealed a glimpse of the same psychological processes that in the past, under much more grave conditions, led to tyranny.

WHEN THE SSP was founded in 1998, many on the left, particularly in England, predicted that the party could never be sustained as a united force. There were too many political divisions on the left, they insisted.

The hostility of the London-based left to this project of socialist unity in Scotland was set out by vividly by Chris Bamberry, now editor of Socialist Worker, in a debate with Alan McCombes of the SSP at the SWP-organised, Socialism in Scotland conference in November 1998.

"The difference between Alan and myself is over what sort of party we need. In 1914, John Maclean was correct when he decided there was fundamental divide between reform and revolution. There was a river of blood between them.

"Maclean, Lenin, Trotsky, Luxemburg understood that reform and revolution aren't two roads to one goal, they are two separate roads to very different goals. The attempt of the Scottish Socialist Party to bridge that divide, to have people from the social democratic tradition, the reformist tradition and the revolutionary tradition in the same party, and to say we can conduct this argu-

ment over a period of time is fundamentally wrong."

Over the next few years, the SWP's analysis was proven to be "fundamentally wrong". So successful was the SSP project that by 2001, even the SWP, the most inveterate opponents of socialist unity, had climbed on board the rolling bandwagon.

From the beginning, there have been substantial political differences within the SSP. There have been robust, even heated debates over Scottish independence, gender equality, crime and drugs policy - without any remote threat to the unity of the party.

Yet in the past few months, the SSP has been brought close to the abyss, not by political differences, but by a court case over a tawdry tabloid sex scandal. In the 18th century, we had the War of Jenkins Ear, between Britain and Spain, when a sea captain allegedly had his ear cut off by Spanish coastguards. Now we have the War of Tommy's Halo.

In the run up to Tommy Sheridan's defamation action an open letter and petition signed by 300 SSP members hailed the looming court case as "a titanic battle" between Tommy and News of the World.

This was never a titanic battle. The miners' strike was a titanic battle. The Poll Tax campaign was a titanic battle. Wapping was a titanic battle. These were major struggles against injustice and inequality involving vast numbers of people. In Tommy Sheridan versus News Group newspapers, the only principle at stake was the right to hypocrisy.

From the outset, Tommy Sheridan attempted to portray this court battle as a heroic political stand against the "evil Murdoch empire". It was nothing of the sort. It was a sordid little dispute between Tommy and the local editor of the

Scottish edition of the News of the World, who probably earns less than George Galloway was paid for his weekly column in the Mail on Sunday. The £200,000 sum that Tommy Sheridan tried to sue News of the World sounds like a lot of money; but News Corporation is worth 150,000 times that amount.

Almost all newspapers are owned by giant corporations, including the local press. The Herald and Glasgow Evening Times, for example, are owned by the Gannett corporation, a multi-billion dollar American media empire which controls over 1000 publications and 22 TV stations worldwide. It would be absurd to suggest that whenever, for example, the Sunday Herald carries a negative article about the SSP, we are under attack from the Gannet corporation.

In the past, Tommy had no compunction about collaborating with the Scottish supplements produced by the "evil Murdoch empire". In 1999, weeks after he was sworn in to the Scottish Parliament, Tommy was offered a column by the Scottish Sun. In private discussions, he argued strongly in favour of accepting the offer, on the grounds that it would allow the ideas of socialism to be taken to mass tabloid readership.

Others argued that this would be mistake, because of the newspaper's associations with the crushing of the trade unions at Wapping in the mid-1980s. They suggested that Tommy should instead meet the editor of the Daily Record, explain that he had been offered £300 a week by the Sun, and offer to write a column for the Record instead for the same money. Martin Clarke, then editor of the Daily Record agreed to the proposition, partly to spike the guns of the paper's arch-rival across the Clyde. If he had not done so, Tommy may well have ended

up on the payroll of the Murdoch Empire.

Moreover, one of Tommy's most prominent supporters and legal advisers in his libel battle was himself a columnist for over year with one of Murdoch's publications, the Times Educational Supplement, during which time he stood as an SSP candidate.

Another of Tommy's supporters, George Galloway, was a long-term columnist with the Mail on Sunday, earning up to £70,000 a year. The newspaper has a longstanding reputation for its right wing, anti-trade union and anti-immigrant stance, and even has historical links to the fascist blackshirts.

That is not a criticism of individual socialists writing for right wing publications owned by anti-trade union corporations. There is a case for getting the socialist message out to the widest possible audience by every means available. But what we will criticise is the crass hypocrisy of Tommy Sheridan's attempt to portray his libel action as a principled political stance.

The lurid allegations about Tommy Sheridan's private life were certainly distasteful. Intrusion into people's private lives has for long been a trademark of the British tabloid press.

But this grubby form of journalism has never been driven by politics. The News of the World is just as likely to target a right wing Tory cabinet minister or a member of the royal family as a socialist politician. Moreover, the newspaper which Tommy himself until recently wrote for, The Mirror, has never been averse to exposing sex and drugs scandals, with recent targets including the supermodel, Kate Moss, John Prescott and Simon Cowell.

It is naïve to expect anything different from the tabloid press. Just as wild animals for-

age for food, newspapers like the News of the World rummage through the private lives of celebrities in the hope of dredging up sleaze and scandal.

FROM THE outset, the SSP executive avoided taking a moral stand on the allegations of the News of the World, including those admitted by Tommy Sheridan.

There is a legitimate debate to be had within the socialist movement about where the limits of acceptable behaviour should be drawn. Some elements of the SSP - notably the Socialist Worker platform - have argued the ultra-libertarian position that even prominent leaders of the socialist movement have the right to behave as they wish in private.

In contrast, most people would draw the line at exploitative behaviour such as paedophilia, prostitution and predatory sex with people under the influence of alcohol and drugs; while recognising that consensual sex between adults, no matter how lurid or unusual, is a private matter.

In an interview before the case began, the actor and film director, Peter Mullan, suggested that Tommy would remain even a political hero even if he was exposed as cannibal. Underlying the humour was the more serious suggestion that the personal behaviour of socialist leaders is irrelevant.

But most people would expect certain standards of personal behaviour from socialist leaders. If James Connolly had beaten his wife or John MacLean had abused children, their reputation as working class heroes would have been in tatters, no matter their political virtues.

However, morality was not at the heart of the discussion when the SSP executive asked Tommy to stand down back in November 2004. The issues at stake were hypocrisy, deceit

and recklessness.

The first stirrings of the crisis that was to have such a profound impact on the SSP first materialised in late 2001. At that time, rumours began to circulate in the Scottish media that Tommy Sheridan had attended a sex club in Manchester.

In a discussion with Alan McCombes, Tommy categorically denied the rumour, claiming that he would never be so foolish as to damage his reputation by such a reckless act. His denial was accepted and the matter was left at that.

His denial under the circumstances could easily be forgiven as an understandable and natural human reaction. However, by his own admission, Tommy went on to repeat exactly the same "reckless" and "foolish" behaviour six months later.

In late 2001, Keith Baldassara had heard the same story of swingers clubs from a different source - a neighbour in Pollok. He confronted Tommy about the rumour. Tommy was evasive and uncomfortable but did not deny the story. Instead, he assured Keith that there was nothing to worry about, that it would never go public.

Later, in 2002, Keith also challenged Tommy over another incident, this time in a hotel room involving Tommy, a prostitute and another individual. Keith had been made aware of this rumour as a result of loose talk by friends of Tommy. The story later resurfaced in the Court of Session, where Tommy strenuously denied the allegation.

In November 2002, Tommy warned Keith that he had been back to the Cupids swingers club in Manchester and that some elements in the media were onto it. This prompted Keith to arrange a meeting with Alan McCombes, where he told him about the conversations between him, Tommy and

others about both the swingers club and the incident in the Moat House hotel.

Because Tommy had denied any personal involvement in the hotel incident, Alan ignored that, but arranged to meet Tommy to confront him over the information which was not in dispute. Tommy accepted that he had behaved foolishly by visiting Cupids. However, he was adamant that the story would never come out into the public domain, and pledged it would never happen again.

Unaware that Tommy had been in the company of a News of the World journalist when he visited the club, Alan accepted these assurances and decided it would be in the best interests of the party, and of Tommy, if the lid was kept firmly closed on the incident. No one else, apart from Keith Baldassara, was informed of these discussions.

In February 2004, another long standing activist in Pollok, George McNeilage, was given reliable information about a story that was circulating around the Glasgow underworld that Tommy Sheridan was involved in visiting sex clubs. George discussed the allegation with Tommy, who again confirmed that it was true.

Even though the story was now quite widely known outside the SSP, it remained hidden from public view and from the party until October 31 2004, when News of the World splashed with a front page article plus a double-page spread which reported a visit to Cupids by the paper's so-called "sex columnist" Anvar Khan in the company of an unnamed married MSP and three other people.

Although the name of the MSP was not revealed, it was clear from the text that Tommy's identity was known to the News of the World, and it was likely that he would be named by the newspaper.

Alan McCombes phoned Tommy in the early hours of Sunday morning after seeing the first edition of the newspaper late on Saturday night. Alan expressed anger that Tommy had concealed the involvement in the escapade of a News of the World journalist, and asked to meet Tommy at the following day's National Council in Edinburgh.

There was never any attempt by Tommy to dispute that he was the unnamed MSP in the article, though he did claim that Anvar Khan had also had an affair with an SNP MSP. At the National Council, Alan and Tommy agreed to put the discussion on hold till the following day, and to involve Keith Baldassara.

They met in Tommy's then office in Glasgow City Chambers on Monday November 1. Alan and Keith suggested that Tommy either ignore the story, or even go to the editor of the Scottish Mirror as soon as he was named to defuse the impact of the story through a sympathetic newspaper.

They also offered to assist him explaining the problem to members of his family, and suggested that he take time off to deal with any personal fallout. Tommy expressed hostility towards any option other than outright denial of any story, including libel action.

He told Keith and Alan that he "could win this", and would "destroy" Anvar Khan. He insisted that if this story came out, he would be not just politically damaged, but would be "totally destroyed" and could never come back.

Keith and Alan strongly disagreed, arguing that, especially if Tommy handled the allegations with dignity and a degree of contrition, any damage would be temporary. People respect those who are prepared to take responsibility for their own actions. They would forgive, and over time forget, pri-

vate indiscretions.

What could destroy Tommy, however, would be precisely the course of action he appeared to be intent on taking - a sustained campaign of lies, including perjury. The meeting reached a stalemate, whereupon Alan and Keith informed Tommy they would now have to consult with a wider group of EC members.

Contrary to some suggestions that have circulated within the party and were repeated by Tommy, his QCs and his witnesses in the Court of Session, there was no factional dispute, no power struggle, and no trace of rivalry or animosity up until this point.

Tommy himself acknowledged this in a public statement after his resignation where he said:

"I would like to take this opportunity to confirm that my resignation as party convenor has nothing at all to do with internal power struggles. There is not and never has been any internal squabbles or back-biting about a leadership challenge."

It should be noted that, up until that point, both Alan McCombes and Keith Baldassara had a very close personal and political relationship with Tommy which had stretched back many years.

At Tommy's request, Alan McCombes had just finished writing an extensive pamphlet on rail public ownership in order to assist Tommy deflect criticisms of the party from sections of the RMT leadership.

Over the next few days, Alan and Keith met the other five MSPs, plus Richie Venton and Allan Green, to warn them of the situation and to seek advice. Unanimously, those involved in the discussions were opposed to Tommy's proposed course of action and asked for a meeting with Tommy to discuss things situation further. Our intention was

to deal with the matter privately and informally rather than take it through the formal structures of the party.

Tommy refused to attend the meeting and insisted that he was not prepared to discuss the matter with anyone. He had made up his mind and made it clear that nothing anyone had to say would convince him otherwise. As a result, a special executive was convened for Tuesday November 9.

Although some of the detail of the discussion of that meeting has been omitted from the minutes, they nonetheless constitute an accurate explanation of the decision taken to ask for Tommy's resignation. Contrary to some of the evidence provided to the Court of Session, there was no shadow of a doubt that Tommy had admitted to attending Cupids twice, in 1996 and 2002 in the company of Anvar Khan and others (though he did not admit to attending the club in 2001).

The issue at stake at the meeting was not morality, although there were some comments about the sleazy and exploitative character of the commercial sex industry, including clubs such as Cupids.

At the time the Scottish Parliament had begun to consider issues such as prostitution tolerance zones, and the licensing of lap dancing clubs. Consequently, there was some concern at the special EC meeting that Tommy's position on these matters could be compromised because of his participation in the sex industry.

However, these points were secondary. The substance of the discussion revolved around lies and hypocrisy. Given Tommy's insistence on denying the truth in the media and ultimately in the courts, all of those present agreed with a heavy heart that there was no alternative but to ask for Tommy's resignation.

Tommy had to leave before the end of the meeting and

before a vote was taken. All of those present, EC members and non-EC regional organisers, voted unanimously to ask Tommy to step down.

At the EC, there was a separate discussion on the timing of his resignation. A minority supported a proposal to ask Tommy to step down the following day, so that there could be some kind of agreed explanation in the Scottish Socialist Voice, rather than the information being reported in the first instance through the mainstream media. However, a majority voted to give Tommy a further few days, until the Saturday, to resign.

Tommy has since tried to rewrite the history of that meeting by claiming that he was asked to stand down because he wanted to fight a court case over a false allegation. This is nonsense.

If the allegation had been false, we would have supported Tommy 100 per cent in any battle to clear his name. But we were not prepared to back a Jeffrey Archer or Jonathan Aitken style libel action to prove a fiction. We argued that fighting to disprove allegations that were true would be a kamikaze action that would potentially destroy the party.

If we had gone along with Tommy's advice, he would still be the convenor; and the party, its newspaper, its websites, its members and its MSPs would all have been mobilised over the past 20 months to fight a battle based on lies.

The ship would have been sailing straight into an iceberg with the crew and passengers oblivious to the disaster ahead. Instead, the officers mutinied against the captain, and have managed to at least partially steer the ship clear of the looming iceberg.

THE RESIGNATION of Tommy Sheridan as convenor was accelerated as a result of

leak to the Daily Record the day after the special executive meeting. The political editor of the Daily Record had phoned Alan McCombes, in the presence of Allan Green, to ask for confirmation that Tommy had resigned.

He had also been falsely informed that Colin Fox had been instrumental in forcing his resignation and had been installed as interim leader; and that CCTV footage had been examined by the EC.

Much of this was fictitious; nonetheless, with rumours now seeping out, Alan McCombes and Tommy Sheridan agreed that the resignation should be brought forward and a statement published that night. The statement praised the historic role of Tommy Sheridan, but did not reveal the reasons for his resignation, explaining that these were private and confidential.

Alan McCombes appeared on the radio news programme, Good Morning Scotland, the following morning to praise Tommy Sheridan for the role that he had played, while insisting that the reasons for his resignation should remain private.

This was the position adhered to rigidly by the SSP EC and press department throughout the coming months; though Tommy himself decided to go on a media charm offensive with a far-fetched story that he had voluntarily resigned to spend more time with his wife and unborn child.

The EC had agreed to provide all the relevant information to the party membership. In practice, some of the more delicate information was withheld even from party members. However, within days of the EC, hundreds of members had been provided with at least some information, with varying degrees of detail reported from region to region and from branch to branch. Inevitably

some of that information was leaked to elements of the media.

But far more damaging was the campaign of spin and misinformation designed to discredit the SSP executive's decision. Within 24 hours of Tommy resignation, pliable journalists were fed lies concerning the resignation, which they then dutifully repeated in their columns in the Scottish Mirror and other newspapers.

In a column that was written less than two days after the special EC, Ron Mackenna of the Scottish Mirror first planted the idea that Tommy had been the victim of a premeditated plot.

"Secret group meetings, a sudden resignation, a not-quite-convincing-explanation and in the background, lurid allegations in a book of such breathtaking tackiness that nobody took it seriously..."

"Let's look at the other rumours that have been flying around for ages. That Tommy's new colleagues, and particular the women in his group, don't think he is quite up to their standard. Laughable though that is.

"That Tommy has become more and more isolated from the strident and often hilariously inept MSPs he brought into the party he created. That they genuinely believe they would be better running the show themselves. And let's ask the question. Is that true? Did they bring him down? Did they seize their chance?"

All of that was utter nonsense. But ominously, it came from a journalist who was very close to Tommy - a fellow columnist on the Scottish Mirror, who at the time also worked for the legal firm which took on Tommy's libel case.

Other journalists took up the same theme. Tommy's resignation was the result of a long-standing power struggle within

the party, motivated by jealousy and rivalry. Some versions circulating inside and outside the party attributed Tommy's demise to a feminist conspiracy, complete with talk of witches' covens.

This vilification of women as the villains of the piece both expressed and pandered to a strain of sexism and misogyny that runs within society as a whole (including not least in newspapers like News of the World).

Tommy Sheridan's notorious Open Letter, published in May 2006, denounced his opponents for wanting to turn the party away from class politics into a "gender-obsessed discussion group". Like much of the rest of the letter, this was nonsense.

In fact, most of those who opposed Tommy's libel action are those who have fought most forcibly to maintain the working class character and orientation of the party. They are mainly concentrated in the working class heartlands of the central belt, while much of Tommy's support has been based on the more middle class and rural sections of the party.

Ironically, some of the women MSPs attacked by Tommy for being "gender-obsessed" have outstanding track records in leading strikes and working class community campaigns. Since 2003 they have also been far more steeped than Tommy in sorting out the day to day problems of people in the poorest communities, including asylum seekers, low paid workers and people with debt problems.

There is an old saying, "No smoke without fire". Because of the tidal waves of misinformation over the past 18 months, some people will be inclined to believe that Tommy has been the victim of a plot. The truth is, they have been duped. The so-called conspiracy to overthrow Tommy is a

blatant lie invented by Tommy himself to explain away his removal as party convenor.

Prior to November 2004, Tommy's principal opponents inside the SSP were groups who are now among his most uncritical supporters. The Socialist Worker platform, for example, repeatedly attacked Tommy as a 'nationalist', especially from 2003 onwards. The CWI had for long denounced Tommy as a 'left nationalist' and a 'parliamentary reformist'.

In contrast, those who have been accused of "assassinating" Tommy Sheridan were on the same side as Tommy in all the political battles fought out within the party prior to November 2004.

Nor were there any personal differences. Some of these accused in the Court of Session of being at the centre of a plot - for example, the party treasurer, Allison Kane - had been close personal friends with Tommy and Gail Sheridan right up until the events of November 2004.

Naturally, some of Tommy's closest comrades and allies felt upset, disappointed and angry at his reckless conduct and his refusal to work with the party to limit the damage that he had created. But there was no conspiracy - other than the plot dreamed up in Tommy's imagination after the event.

ANOTHER VERSION of events that persisted for months after Tommy's resignation was that the SSP executive had acted unnecessarily harshly towards Tommy in a fit of extreme Puritanism.

George Galloway, for example, in a TV interview before the court case, lambasted the SSP as "Calvinist-Trotskyites" for the action taken back in November 2004.

For months on end, we endured similar jibes in silence in order to protect the privacy of Tommy and his family. Like

Ghandi, the SSP turned the other cheek and tried to concentrate on rebuilding support for the party, even at times under extreme provocation.

Whether, in retrospect, we should have brought all the facts out into the public domain is a legitimate point of discussion. It would certainly have allowed us to move on and would almost certainly have forestalled the catastrophe of July 2006.

The fact is, allegations of Puritanism, Calvinism and Talibanism against the SSP executive were without foundation. Ironically, it was Tommy himself who adopted a moralistic stance, with his insistence that if it ever became public that he had attended a swingers club, he would be "politically destroyed".

We rejected this argument and suggested that, providing Tommy dealt with any revelations in a mature and honest fashion, it would eventually blow over. He could have ignored the allegations.

Alternatively he could have taken it on the chin and apologised, perhaps pre-empting News of the World by coming clean via a more sympathetic newspaper. Or he could have issued what is described in media jargon as a "non-denial denial" - a statement along the lines of "I will treat such outrageous allegations with the contempt they deserve".

Either way, the matter would eventually have faded into the mists of history. Tommy himself could have survived as convenor if he had taken the course of action recommended to him.

Unfortunately, Tommy was unwilling to allow his public image to be tarnished. Since being elected to the Scottish Parliament, Tommy had carefully nurtured a reputation as a clean-cut, faithful husband.

In contrast to other Scottish political leaders, who have

tended to be circumspect about their family life, Tommy rarely squandered any opportunity to parade his marriage before the public via an endless stream of glossy magazine articles and photo opportunities.

In a classic example of Victorian-style hypocrisy, Tommy's private behaviour was in stark contradiction to his public persona. His private lifestyle could and should have been Tommy's own personal choice. Even hypocrisy could be overlooked, providing it did not affect the lives of anyone else.

But what is unforgivable is that, in order to defend his right to be a hypocrite, Tommy Sheridan inflicted disastrous damage on his party, dragged dozens of his comrades through into the courts, put pressure on others to commit perjury and risk serious legal recriminations, and, most despicably of all, in front of the entire Scottish media, interrogated women who had been dragooned before the court under citation about details of their intimate lives.

To protect his own privacy, Tommy has been prepared to drag before the salivating tabloid media of Scotland salacious details of innocent people who have never courted publicity, nor attempted to portray themselves as virgin angels.

He has also publicly, in the highest court in the land, accused 11 members of his own executive of a monstrous political frame-up including forgery of documents, a criminal conspiracy to pervert the course of justice, and systematic perjury.

WITHOUT THIS court case everything could have been dramatically different. During 2006, the party had begun to get back on track after the upheavals of late 2004 and early 2005.

Membership was rising again. Street activity was flourishing. The only poll to measure Holyrood voting intentions - commissioned by the SNP - showed the SSP ahead of the Greens and back to the same level of support as in 2002. Even the wounds opened up in November 2004 had begun to heal, with relations, for example, on the EC and in the parliamentary group more healthy than at any time since November 2004,

The 2006 national conference was a model of open, tolerant and respectful democratic debate. Relations among MSPs and other EC members had improved steadily. The People Not Profit campaign assisted the party to turn outwards to the streets, workplaces, communities and universities.

However, there was always a storm cloud looming over the horizon. From the day Tommy Sheridan's libel action against the News of the World was announced, many members of the EC were uneasy.

We did not accept Tommy's repeated assurances that the News of the World would settle out of court. We were concerned that, whatever the truth or otherwise of the specific case under dispute, the litigation action had the potential to wreak serious damage on Tommy's reputation, drag the party into the courts, and involve innocent people in the legal crossfire. We were also alarmed at Tommy's apparent determination to stop at nothing to win the case.

When, eventually, the News Group legal team came after the SSP November 2004 minutes, the party was thrown back 18 months. It also triggered a new onslaught against the integrity of honest and honourable party members.

This time, instead of conducting a guerrilla war from the shadows, Tommy declared

open warfare. This escalation of the conflict appears to have been prepared behind the scenes in discussion with various groupings, notably the SW platform.

At a time when the party was under attack from the state, with one member in jail, homes and offices raided, 15 cited as witnesses, and a branch under legal investigation because of a resolution it passed, this was a time above all to stand united.

Instead Tommy Sheridan published his Open Letter which he circulated to every section of the media in Scotland, including every title published by the Murdoch press. The letter is one of the most dismal documents ever circulated within the socialist movement in Scotland. Its content were far more damaging to the reputation of committed socialists than anything the News of the World had ever printed about Tommy Sheridan.

It is a mixture of quarter-truth, grotesque distortion and outright fabrication. Not one of the imaginary grievances listed by Tommy in the document was ever previously raised by Tommy within the party using the formal procedures which exist to deal with such complaints. Nor had he even raised any of these complaints informally.

This was not a serious political document. It was a defamatory and inflammatory amalgam of fiction and prejudice, dripping with vitriol from beginning to end.

It was targeted not just at SSP members, but also at the wider public via the media. Its purpose was to whip up an atmosphere of rampant suspicion in advance of the court case, paving the way for Tommy to portray himself in court as the victim of a Machiavellian plot.

The truth was exactly the opposite. The core of the SSP leadership had tried for 18

months to save Tommy from himself. We had strongly advised him to desist from what we regarded as the political and legal equivalent of a suicide bombing, in which he would blow himself up and inflict serious damage on others in the process.

In early May 2006, the party was dragged for the first time into Tommy's court battle when News of the World cited the minutes of the November 9 meeting.

Unfortunately, the first the party became aware that the minutes would be cited was on Thursday May 11 2006, when Sheriff Officers appeared at the party HQ in Kinning Park with citations against four party members.

Frances Curran, Colin Fox, Alan McCombes and Eddie Truman were all instructed to appear in the Court of Session before a commissioner the following Tuesday, May 16, with all relevant notes and minutes.

Unknown to us, the citing of these documents had been the subject of a legal battle extending over several days from Monday May 8 to Wednesday May 10. During this legal battle, Tommy Sheridan's lawyers contested the citations. Yet this information was withheld from the party.

Challenged by Colin Fox to explain why, Tommy claimed that he did not know about the battle over the citations. This was frankly incredulous. In legal cases, lawyers take instructions from their clients every step of the way. It is beyond belief that Tommy did not know in advance of the three-day hearing that News of the World were attempting to cite the November 9 minutes.

Even if it had been politically acceptable to rewrite our own history by falsifying the minutes, or destroying them as called for by Cardonald branch during the legal battle, this option was eliminated by Tommy's failure to notify the

party that the minutes were likely to be cited.

As soon as the court ruled in favour of the citation of the minutes, they became effectively court property. At that point, destruction or falsification of the documents would have potentially led to serious criminal charges against party office bearers.

It would have taken us out of the realms of contempt of court through defiance, which is a civil offence, into the realms of perverting the course of justice, which can carry a sentence of up to ten years imprisonment. Jeffrey Archer, for example, was sentenced to four years imprisonment for falsifying his own diary in pursuit of his libel case.

There has been a separate debate within the party over whether minutes should ever have been taken of the November 9 2004 meeting. Yet up until they were cited, the existence of these minutes had never been remotely contentious within the party.

According to the official handwritten notes of the EC meeting which ratified these minutes (November 21), it was Rosemary Byrne who proposed that, for reasons of confidentiality, we should keep a single copy of the minutes- and that copy should be held by Allan Green.

This arrangement was reported to a special 140-strong National Council meeting the following Saturday. Allan Green, the National Secretary asked the National Council to make an exception to the normal procedure of circulating the minutes because of their sensitive content. His plea was backed at the same meeting by Tommy Sheridan, who also asked that the minutes remain confidential.

Not one person at that National Council meeting suggested that the minutes should be destroyed. Nor did anyone suggest that the existence of

these minutes should be concealed from the media, even though the minutes had been referred to in the Herald newspaper on the morning of the special National Council, November 27 2004.

During the subsequent eighteen months, not one resolution was ever moved at any meeting of the party suggesting that the minutes should be destroyed. Nor was a single letter received from any member of the party suggesting this course of action, even though the existence of minutes of the crucial meeting was general knowledge within the party and had never been hidden from the media.

But then in January 2006, Tommy Sheridan gave a personal profile interview to the Sunday Herald, in which he falsely claimed that for three weeks before the special EC meeting of November 9, 2004, the party had been discussing how to deal with the forthcoming Fiona McGuire allegations in the News of the World.

In the same January 2006 interview, Tommy denied the existence of any minutes. This was the first time that any party member had tried to pretend that no minutes existed.

The party press officer, Eddie Truman, received a call from the Sunday Herald on the day before the publication of the Sunday Herald interview. Eddie did not know that Tommy had given an interview, and was oblivious to the fact that Tommy had denied the existence of any minutes of the November 9 2004 meeting.

He was asked some factual questions about the party's internal procedures, including "Are minutes taken of EC meetings?" Unaware of the purpose of this line of questioning, Eddie simply confirmed that yes, EC meetings are minuted. He was then asked if the November 9 2004 EC meeting was minuted and again factually confirmed that



minutes of the meeting did exist.

This was simple statement of fact which no-one in the party had ever previously tried to deny. But when Eddie's quote appeared in the Sunday Herald, attributed to an "SSP spokesperson", it was juxtaposed against a denial by Tommy Sheridan of the existence of any minutes.

It is unfortunate, to say that least, that some party members have criticised Eddie Truman for this innocuous exchange, which was entirely in line with his role as national press officer.

If anyone deserves criticism for the conflicting information in the Sunday Herald it is Tommy Sheridan, who, without consulting with the press officer, the national secretary or anyone else, contradicted the party's previous public acknowledgement of the existence of minutes.

Eighteen months after it was reported to the party that Allan Green would keep a single copy of the minutes, some people in the party began to argue that we should never have taken minutes in the first place.

This argument only emerged after the minutes had already been cited by News of the World. It is an absurd argument.

In a party like the SSP, not everything is minuted. Considerations of time, space and relevance all have to be taken into account. But there can no question that key decisions affecting the future of the socialist movement have to be explained in written form.

The November 9 was not a routine, run-of-the mill meeting. This was a historic event. When the most charismatic and popular socialist leader in Scotland for a generation and more is forced to stand down from his position that requires an explanation.

The minutes of that meeting

are both a vital historical record and an insurance policy providing protection for the party against those who have shown themselves intent on dragging the good name of the SSP through the gutter.

For a serious political party, written records of major decisions are not an optional extra, like tomato sauce on chips. They are vital to preserve the truth and ensure historical accountability.

Even under the best of circumstances, decisions that are unrecorded can be open to misinterpretation, especially with the passage of time. Written records, in contrast, are not subject to memory lapse, ambiguity, or wilful misinterpretation. They cannot be falsified without being physically destroyed or rewritten.

If anything, the events of July 2006 reinforce the vital importance of keeping minutes in order to explain the reasoning behind vital decisions. The November 9 minutes are not salacious in any way, but they do provide an explanation for what was an extraordinary and even traumatic decision.

The events surrounding Tommy Sheridan's have been misinterpreted and even falsified by various forces either for political reasons or simply to discredit the 2004 EC. The Socialist Workers Party, for example, made the extraordinary and now discredited claim that Tommy Sheridan was removed because of his support for the Rose Gentle campaign.

Without written records explaining key decisions, the door can be left open to the rewriting of history by those with a political interest in manufacturing misinformation, or those who shout the loudest.

Not that the existence of minutes deterred Tommy from rewriting history and impeaching his comrades to save his own skin. In the Court of

Session, he went so far as to submit as evidence a forged document purporting to be the real minutes of the November 9 2004 meeting.

This fake set of minutes first materialised in mid-May, two days before Alan McCombes was due to appear Lady Smith in the Court of Session to answer for his refusal to hand over the real minutes.

The lawyers acting for News of the World had contacted Fred Tyler, the lawyer acting for the SSP, to inform him that they had anonymously received a document which claimed to be the minutes of the November 9 2004 meeting. The document was then shown to Colin Fox and Alan McCombes, who were able to confirm to Fred Tyler that it was a forgery.

This fake minute was heavily based on the original minute, with some identical detail. Though it backed up Tommy's fictitious version of events, it could only have been created by someone who was familiar, not just with the general content of the real minutes, but also with some of the secondary detail.

It was in all probability the work of someone who had recently read the authentic minutes. At the same time, the forged document contains important errors and omissions. The attendance list at the top comprises initials rather than full names, which would be the normal format of SSP minutes. It also excluded the initials of three people who had been at the November 2004 meeting.

It is no coincidence that these three people were never cited by News of the World. Whoever provided News of the World with the fake minutes also provided them with information which was then used by the newspapers lawyers to identify most of those present at the November 9 2004 EC

meeting. The forger effectively delivered names on a plate to News of the World, who then seized the opportunity to drag these names before the court under threat of imprisonment.

WHILE THIS skulduggery was taking place, the majority of the EC attempted to deal with the mounting crisis in a responsible way. When the minutes were cited, we considered three options - lie, defy or comply.

In a meeting with Allan Green and Colin Fox on Friday May 12 2006, Tommy had argued for defiance. At that meeting, he was shown a copy of the minutes. After reading the document, he suggested that it would damage his case, but explained that if it was eventually handed into the court the damage would not necessarily be fatal. However, he stated that there was a strong labour movement tradition of defiance and argued that was the party should do.

At that stage, neither Allan nor Colin were convinced there was any option but to hand over the document. Three of the four people cited were in a vulnerable position. Frances Curran is the single mother of a six year old child. Both Colin Fox and Frances Curran could be thrown out of office if bankrupted as result of defiance of the Court of Session. Eddie Truman had just been diagnosed with a serious illness.

In further discussions over the next few days, it became clear that of the four individuals, only Alan McCombes was in a position to sustain a strategy of defiance. At the EC meeting of May 14, it was agreed that he take sole custody of the minutes. It was further agreed that party would fight a two-pronged battle to keep the minutes out of the hands of the court. One prong would involve a legal challenge, which in turn would mean hir-

ing a lawyer and a QC. If that legal challenge failed, Alan would then refuse to hand over the document.

Given some of the misinformed allegations that have been bandied about since concerning the costs of that action, it is important to emphasise that almost all costs incurred were the result of the legal challenge, rather than as a result of the defiance strategy. Alan could have simply refused hand over the minutes and accept a jail sentence at no cost other than the £500 fine that was eventually imposed.

However the EC agreed unanimously, with the support of every political faction and every region, that we should first fight out a legal battle and underwrite the costs of that legal challenge. Most of the costs of our legal representation have already been cleared. Still outstanding are two other elements. First, a £5000 bill imposed by the court to meet the costs of the raids on homes and premises. These raids were ordered by the court in response to the resolution from the Cardonald branch which called for the destruction of the minutes. Thus a reckless resolution has cost the party £5000.

The other outstanding bill is the News of the World legal costs which were awarded against Alan McCombes. This could amount to tens of thousands of pounds. However, Alan has agreed to declare himself bankrupt, if necessary, to avoid these costs.

The strategy of defiance was designed primarily to unify the party. There were important ethical issues at stake concerning the right of a political party to conduct its business in private. However, given Tommy's determination to press ahead with a court case in which his own integrity was on the line, it was always going to be an uphill struggle to win any legal challenge.

More importantly, the strategy of defiance had begun to unite the SSP in the midst of a profound crisis. Two consecutive EC meetings voted overwhelmingly in favour of the defiance strategy, including all strands of opinion on the executive.

Two all-members meetings in Glasgow and Edinburgh had revealed massive support across the board for the strategy. Though no votes were taken, the mood of both meetings was clear: resounding support for defiance.

At both the EC and the members meetings, there were brave but isolated voices calling for compliance. But no-one suggested that our strategy should be based on lies and perjury. Although a group of Cardonald branch members handed out a letter at the Glasgow meeting calling for the minutes to be destroyed.

Unfortunately, the unity of the party was deliberately shattered by Tommy Sheridan at the National Council meeting of May 28 2006. By this time, we had already fought out a battle in the Court of Session over several weeks. Alan McCombes had already been locked up in Saughton Jail for implementing the defiance strategy of the party.

During the discussions over this strategy, Tommy Sheridan had failed to appear at any of the formal meetings. He did not attend either of the two EC meetings, citing legal reasons for his absence. Nor did he attend either of the two all-members meetings. Nor had he attempted to make any contact with Alan McCombes during his legal battle to protect Tommy's confidentiality and his own liberty.

Then, out of the blue, Tommy issued his Open Letter, and distributed it to the media, including the Murdoch press. This was the political equivalent of hand grenade being

lobbed into a packed meeting. To their shame, the CWI platform later boasted that it was they who had persuaded Tommy to distribute this letter, after he had met them to complain of an imaginary smear campaign against him.

At best, the CWI were duped by Tommy. The fact is that relations within the MSPs group had improved steadily over the months. The heated intensity of late 2004 and early 2005 had faded into the mists of the past. Inside the meeting, Tommy indulged in a theatrical rant designed to set people at each others throats. In line with the contents of his Open Letter, he called for the minutes to be handed over, effectively terminating the defiance strategy.

This prompted both the CWI and the Socialist Worker platforms into making a dizzying U-turn. The SW platform, in particular, had been extravagant to the point of light-mindedness in their enthusiasm for defiance and the jailing of Alan McCombes. Their attitude was summed up by one of their members at the Glasgow all-members' meeting: "Defy, defy, without blinking an eye." Then, suddenly and en masse, they voted to hand over the minutes.

Others at the National Council voted with Tommy in good faith. They genuinely did not believe that defiance could be sustained. Some people were also misled by a report in the Sunday Herald into believing that the newspaper had a copy of the minutes, or detailed information about the content of the minutes. The report was in fact was a rehashed version of an article that had appeared in the newspaper back in November 2004, which provided some sketchy information - information which had already been widely reported to party members at the time.

Many people at the National

Council also believed that by arguing for the minutes to be handed over to the court, Tommy was prepared to accept damage to his own defamation case for the greater good of the party. They were mistaken.

This was neither an honest nor a brave move by Tommy. His undeclared new strategy was to go into court to denounce the minutes as a forgery, and to impugn the integrity of the national secretary, Allan Green, the minutes secretary Barbara Scott, and any other cited EC member who dared defend the legitimacy of these minutes.

His outrageous accusation that there was a "cabal" in the party out to get him was an integral part of this underhand strategy. This was not about politics; it was about painting his own SSP comrades as malevolent monsters, in preparation for his preposterous accusations in court of a political frame-up.

IN COURT Tommy cynically used the SSP evidence and minutes to deflect attention away from the more explosive evidence that was provided to the court. It was a classic diversionary tactic designed to muddy the waters by focussing the attention of the jury on a sinister political conspiracy.

In effect, Tommy put his own party on trial. For the SSP the most important battle fought out in the Court of Session was not the battle between the News of the World and Tommy Sheridan.

Although there was a lot of money at stake in that clash, it was essentially a petty squabble over a sleazy sex story in a tabloid newspaper. It was a fight over an ancient fish and chip wrapper.

A far more important battle was the battle to rescue the good name of the SSP, which was being systematically trashed in front of the whole

Scottish media by Tommy Sheridan.

From day one of the trial, Tommy set about vilifying his own party. His campaign of denigration reached its depths when Tommy accused a 11 SSP members- including the party convenor, Colin Fox, the Glasgow regional organiser, Richie Venton, and the national secretary, Allan Green - of committing perjury in pursuit of a political vendetta against him.

In an outburst that was reported on the national news, he attacked Keith Baldassara as "bitter and twisted", "the mother of all backstabbers" and the "chief character assassin". This about the man who has been the lynchpin of the socialist movement on the ground in Pollok - and who has for seven years carried out the demanding and non-glamorous work of dealing with people's problems on the ground on behalf of Tommy Sheridan.

Tommy believed he could turn his libel action into a pale imitation of the Moscow Trials, with a parade of SSP EC members colluding in their own political crucifixion, complete with public confessions of being involved in a fantastical conspiracy.

Incredibly, some people in the party have condemned SSP witnesses for refusing to turn themselves into abject sacrificial lambs for the greater glory of Tommy Sheridan. This version of socialism is straight out of Animal Farm. It replaces socialist solidarity with obsequious obedience to the will of a supposedly superior being. It is corrupt and bankrupt.

The defiance strategy of the SSP ended the day that the National Council, rightly or wrongly, voted to end defiance and hand over the minutes to News of the World. From that moment onwards, the honourable course of action for cited SSP members was to tell

the truth and defend the integrity and history of the party, and the honesty of its office bearers.

Some people, particularly members of the Socialist Workers platform have attacked those who gave evidence as "scabs" and "class traitors". These supposed "class traitors" include people like Richie Venton, who is regarded as hero by many trade unionists the length of the UK by many trade unionists for the outstanding work he has conducted in solidarity with workers in struggle; Carolyn Leckie, who has led successful strikes of low paid workers against both multinational corporations and her own union leaders; and others who have been jailed for standing up for their class.

Those who have had the courage to stand up for the honour of a small socialist party under public attack are the opposite of scabs and class traitors. Indeed, scabs and class traitors are those who put their own naked self-interest above the interests of everyone else.

The action of the eleven SSP members who told the truth in the Court of Session was exactly in line with the overwhelming decision of the last EC meeting before the trial on June 18. By a vote of 17 for; 2 against; and one abstention, a resolution was carried instructing cited witnesses to neither lie nor risk imprisonment for contempt of court. No-one proposed any alternative strategy.

It should also be emphasised that the only person who was inside the Court of Session voluntarily was Tommy Sheridan. It was within his power to stop this case before it started. Strenuous efforts were made to persuade him to drop the action, including an offer that the party would raise funds to cover the costs he had already

run up. The offer was refused.

For those cited by News of the World, the choices were stark. If they failed to appear, they would have been arrested and jailed for contempt of court. If they lied, they would run the risk of perjury. Indeed, the judge explicitly warned one SSP witness that perjury carries a lengthy prison sentence.

Moreover, if the SSP witnesses had lied, they would have effectively rewritten the history of the party under pressure from Tommy Sheridan. No-one could ever in the future set the record straight without incriminating everyone else. And the version of November 9 2004 that portrays all 19 people in attendance at that meeting as a gang of sinister conspirators would have been enshrined forever.

Some people suggested a slightly different approach: collective memory loss. Under this infantile plan, 15 SSP members were to troop into the witness box and claim they could not remember why Tommy Sheridan resigned.

At best, the SSP would have become the laughing stock of Scotland - the party that sacks its charismatic leader and no-one can remember the reason why. Nor would such a blatant conspiracy to conceal the facts have cut any ice with the court. Over days of cross-examination, the witnesses would have been scattered and divided - as those who did try to give fudged evidence on behalf of Tommy discovered at first hand.

It is important to recall the reason why we took the decision to ask Tommy to stand down in the first place. It was not a decision motivated by moral revenge, but a decision designed to protect the party.

If, almost two years later, the EC had lied under oath to protect Tommy, we would have negated the reasons behind the November 9 decision in the first place. The integrity of the party would be in tatters, and the November 9 2004 decision would have been pointless.

FOR THE best part of two years, much of the leadership of the SSP has been under sustained bombardment from inside and outside party.

A large part of the party have never reconciled themselves to the unanimous decision of the EC which led to Tommy's resignation, despite that decision being endorsed overwhelmingly by the party's National Council. Instead of respecting that decision and moving on, these groupings grabbed every opportunity to reopen the wounds of the past.

Faced with that bombardment, which reached its crescendo when Tommy issued his Open Letter some individuals crumbled. These included people who had been part of that unanimous decision in the first place, and others who had not been present at the meeting but supported the decision wholeheartedly.

Some individuals and groupings, including for example the entire CWI platform, carried out a 180-degree U-turn on the court case. After repeatedly and correctly arguing that the case should never go ahead, in the feverish atmosphere of the last few months they panicked, fearing that Tommy would be transformed into a hero by winning the libel case and they would left out in the cold.

Others, notably the SW platform got it consistently wrong, although their member at the November 9 2004 did vote for Tommy's resignation. But from

then on, the SW platform acted as Tommy's most fanatical cheerleaders, urging him onwards at every stage. They provided theoretical and political legitimacy for Tommy's destructive conduct.

Many others backed Tommy for honourable and genuine reasons. They believed Tommy was entirely innocent, or at least that his defamation case centred solely on a false allegation. This was an honest mistake. Tommy is an extremely persuasive individual and did manage to hoodwink many people into believing that he had been victimised by News of the World for political reasons, including seven members of the jury.

On the eve of the court case, these groups combined in an unholy alliance, the so-called 'SSP Majority'. This disparate mish-mash is divided on a range of important political issues. Some are pro-independence, others anti-independence; some are pro-gender equality, others anti-gender equality; some are ultra-libertarian on crime and punishment, others are to the right of

the Tories. They are united only by their hostility to the majority of the leadership and their desperation to restore Tommy Sheridan to his rightful place as SSP convenor.

Will this battle rage on until the October conference and beyond, tearing the party apart in the run-up to 2007? Or is there any possibility of a reunited party?

Right now, that decision is very much in the hands of Tommy Sheridan and his supporters. Any rapprochement has to be based on truth and honesty. It is difficult to unite fact with fiction, truth with fantasy, honesty with deceit.

Everyone makes mistakes. Some people might legitimately argue that the biggest mistake of all on the part of the 2004 EC was its naïve belief that we could keep the facts of Tommy's resignation concealed from the wider public. Perhaps the party would be in better shape if we had gone open at the time, rather than emphasise respect for Tommy's privacy. Ironically, Tommy himself has since shown that

he has no respect for other people's privacy if that stands in the way of his.

Mistakes can be rectified and forgiven. But they need first to be acknowledged. In order to move forward on principled basis, it is necessary that the party disowns any attempt to falsify the facts and rewrite the history of the party.

Tommy's accusations in court, which appear to have been accepted by at least some of the jurors at the trial, have left a cloud of suspicion hanging over the heads of a number of honest and respected SSP members who have devoted their lives to the cause of socialism. That cloud could be dispelled by a public apology from Tommy.

Then, and perhaps only then, can we draw a line under this fiasco and start to redirect our efforts towards what we do best - fighting injustice and promoting the causes of peace, freedom and socialism.

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