

GOVERNING NORTH BRITAIN: RECENT STUDIES OF
SCOTTISH POLITICS

Chris Allen

Department of Politics
University of Edinburgh

- C. Harvie No Gods and Precious Few Heroes: Scotland 1914-80. London: Edward Arnold, 1981, 182pp
- W.L. Miller The End of British Politics? Scots and English Political Behaviour in the Seventies. Oxford: Clarendon, 1981, 281pp
- J. Bochel, D. Denver, & A. Macartney (eds.) The Referendum Experience: Scotland 1979. Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1981, 210pp
- H.M. Drucker (ed.) John P. Mackintosh on Scotland. London: Longman, 1982, 232pp
- F. Bealey & J. Sewel The Politics of Independence: a Study of Scottish Town. Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1981, 272pp
- R.S. Moore The Social Impact of Oil: the Case of Peterhead. London: Routledge Kegan Paul, 1982, 189pp
- A.D. Smith The Ethnic Revival in the Modern World. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981, 240pp
- C.H. Williams (ed.) National Separatism. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1982, 317pp.

In the heady days of devolution and the zenith of nationalism, when Scotland for a moment ceased to be North Britain, books, theses and articles flowed out on Scottish politics. Most were on devolution and nationalism; many could barely be distinguished from each other, and all too few were of lasting worth. The flood abruptly ceased after 1979, but in the wake of the Referendum, work of much greater substance has begun to appear. These eight volumes are no less concerned with the old themes, but they handle them in a more scholarly and critical fashion, they are better documented and supported by extensive archival and field work, and they help us - at least - to begin to answer many of the questions the older literature begged or evaded.

Harvie's book is the final volume of a 'New History of Scotland'

in eight parts - of which the seventh remains frustratingly unpublished. Like the others its focus is on political history, where it does much to fill major gaps, notably in the treatment of the thirties, of the impact of Tom Johnston as Secretary of State, and of that desperate nadir of modern Scottish politics, the late forties and nineteen fifties. Linked to this account, more coherently than in previous attempts, are Harvie's chapters on the economy and social change in the 1922-64 period. Apart from being remarkably succinct accounts, drawing on a wide variety of sources both general and particular, and vivid in their use of instance and anecdote, these chapters help to establish both the peripherality and the particularity of Scotland within the United Kingdom.

Particularity for Harvie does not simply lie in Scotland's characteristic political and social institutions. Indeed he provides a briefer account of these than does Miller's introductory chapter in The End of British Politics, and he prefers instead to devote a chapter to culture and the media. What makes Scotland different is less some enduring set of factors, significant though these may be in its political history, than a recent historical process. This is the increasing peripheralisation of Scotland during the first half of this century, stemming from its economic decline and changes in the state, and giving rise to an increasingly parochial style and focus in its institutions both public and private, and to the predominance by default of a new social category, the 'state-sector middle class'. Such themes are to be found also in the work of Stephen Maxwell, and it is chastening to note that the three most stimulating writers on Scottish politics - Harvie, Maxwell and Nairn - far from being full time members of Politics Departments, spend more time in political activity and in the study of Scottish history and culture.

Harvie makes very different use of these themes, however, providing us with an excellent account of the growth of the Labour Party in Scotland and its steady development into a conservative and rigid machine, and of the growth of the complacent, authoritarian and at times effective system of government which Scotland suffers. What he does not provide is an account of modern nationalism, despite the book's claim to cover the period to 1980. In practice his references to nationalism and indeed to the bulk of the last twenty years are cursory and descriptive, in sharp contrast to the earlier chapters

which are full of pithy and challenging analytical passages and comments. His chapter in the Referendum study makes it clear that Harvie can write about contemporary events with as much verve and insight, but one can only regret that in this book he had not been able to do so.

By contrast, Bill Miller is almost entirely concerned with the last ten years, though he provides a useful survey of events since 1945. As this is but an introduction to the rest of the book, it ignores much of what Harvie discusses in favour of the familiar themes of the seventies - nationalism, oil, planning, and devolution. They are encountered in three contexts: as part of the narrative account which Miller provides in the early and late chapters, as issues in the 1974 elections which are the focus of central chapters, and as the core elements in his discussion of the attitudes of the Scottish electorate. The narrative is of course familiar, and has already been covered in Drucker and Brown's The Politics of Nationalism and Devolution (Longman, 1980) and from a different perspective in Keating and Bleiman's Labour and Scottish Nationalism (Macmillan 1980). There are no surprises in it, but there are some unexpected goodies: Miller's brief but convincing discussion of the reasons for the decline of Conservative support in Scotland is the best available.

So also is the sophisticated and wide-ranging election study. It uses the data of the British and Scottish Election Surveys of 1974 to describe and explain voting behaviour in terms of attitudes and social variables, and to set out its spatial variations, a relatively neglected topic which Miller handles better than the political geographers who usually monopolise it. Miller's strength in this section is his mathematical training; he presents his data and conclusions in considerable detail and with great care. Very properly, he does not go beyond his evidence, but infuriatingly he will not allow his readers to do so, or even to generate their own interpretations of his data. Almost all of it is presented in an already processed form from which the original figures are missing. Thus many of the tables concern the degree of difference between Scottish and English voters but not the basic results for each category. For a book with such a wealth of statistical material it is surprisingly difficult to do more than note Miller's conclusions.

The most important of these concern the linked questions of which attitudes most affected voting in 1974, and of how distinct is Scottish voting behaviour. Miller is more willing than Richard Rose (Class does not equal party: the decline of a model of British Voting; Glasgow: Centre for the Study of Public Policy, 1981) to argue that social characteristics are strongly correlated with voting behaviour, but he sees attitudes as more significant, especially in understanding 'third party' voting in general and SNP voting in particular. Thus the absence or weakness of certain social determinants at either individual or constituency level makes for a lessened likelihood of voting for the main British parties. What causes a shift in voting, however, is the electors' degree of 'trust' in the main parties, especially when this is equally high (or low) for both. In turn, this tendency to abandon main parties is 'amplified' in Scotland to produce SNP voting by the degree of attachment to devolution (or self-government), to Scottish oil⁽¹⁾ or to a conception of oneself as Scottish rather than British.

Despite its title, this is a cautious and narrowly conceived book. Its conclusions apply only to 1974, and since it has little to say on how attitudes come to change it is hard to apply its arguments with confidence to the 1979 election. Since political behaviour is seen entirely in terms of measurable attitudes and voting decisions, its discussion of the existence of a 'Scottish dimension' in British politics is inherently limited. If one accepts these limitations, there is much to be gained from Miller's work in building up a broader account of Scottish politics. Without it we would be much less able to understand not just Scottish voting and recent political history, but also the political sociology of Scotland and the nature of its major parties.

Although his opening words are about the 1979 Devolution Referendum, Miller devotes only six pages to it, all descriptive rather than interpretive. For an authoritative account of this dismal episode one can now turn to The Referendum Experience, a collection of papers edited by John Bochel, David Denver and Allan Macartney. Modelled on the Nuffield Election Studies, it covers background history and future prospects, the campaign and campaigners, and the role of the media. The information is copious, accurate and well chosen, and the study has a relevance well beyond the event itself, touching as

it does on the use of the referendum device, on the questions of bias and 'balance' in broadcasting, and on the constraints of political action outside the familiar framework of partisan competition between political parties.

The role of the media occupies a quarter of the text, and the contributors make it clear that little though this may have been intended, its overall impact was considerable and ultimately one-sided. The operation of balance, the 'image of the contest' presented by the press, the politicians' monopoly of broadcast commentary, and the steady trivialisation of the issues involved, all aided the opponents of devolution. (There are parallels here to the work of the Glasgow University Media Group, to which interestingly no reference is made). More enlightening still are the descriptions of the campaigns in Scotland's main cities and the Regions. Apart from showing that Conservatives very quickly came to see the issue in terms of party conflict, they emphasize the damaging effect of divisions within the 'Yes' campaign, and the high degree of apathy and opposition within the Labour and Liberal Parties, neither of which could persuade even half their supporters to actually vote 'yes' in line with party commitment. Particularly poignant in this context is Chris Harvie's graphic description of the Labour campaign in Lothian Region, with its small group of young, middle-class devolutionaries facing the 'old gang' of Labour 'activists' who had no intention of becoming involved.

The editors might have made more of this lack of role for the official Labour machine in answering the question of why the devolutionaries failed, especially since Labour's commitment to devolution was reaffirmed after the referendum while prominent antidevolutionaries were rewarded with nominations, party positions, and Shadow ministerial posts. Instead they see the declining support for devolution in terms of increasingly partisan voting, the weaknesses of the Scotland Act and the Labour Government, and the lack of 'enthusiasm' in the campaigns. In so doing, and perhaps wisely, they shift the focus of discussion from blame for defeat towards factors which are likely to apply to any future devolution referendum. In the light of what they report one cannot but share the measured pessimism of James Kellas' chapter on the aftermath of the Referendum.

Among the many answers offered at the time to the question of 'why we lost' was the death of John Mackintosh just before the campaign

began. Mackintosh himself would have decried any such personal importance, but many would agree with the comment by Henry Drucker in his introduction to John P. Mackintosh on Scotland that:

"It is no romantic desire to undo what is done which makes many think that the Referendum result on 1 March 1979 might have been different if he had lived and dominated the campaign. Few other Scottish Labour leaders believed in it sincerely; most of those who did were tainted with the other failures of the, by then, thoroughly bedraggled government. In the Labour Movement his voice would have had an authority others lacked. Outside it, his great advantage was that almost alone among devolutionists no-one could accuse him of being a secret separatist. He had the will, the zeal, the ability and the platform to put the case for a democratically accountable Scottish government: the case that the anti-devolutionists never answered."

Over half of Dr. Drucker's splendid selections from Mackintosh's writing and speeches are concerned with devolution, its relationship with the reform of local government, and Labour's equivocation on the issue. This section includes the incisive 1978 Scotsman piece, 'Do some Scots dread democracy?' (though sadly without the delightful cartoon that originally accompanied it), a piece which goes a long way to confirm Dr. Drucker's judgement. The rest of the collection covers other key issues which he raised - agriculture, licensing and alcoholism, education, and the EEC - as well as his position on nationalism, where his well known debate with Stephen Maxwell in Question is reproduced. Thus Mackintosh's main intellectual and campaigning interests relevant to Scotland are all well represented. What could not be so illustrated was his constituency role, both as MP and within the Labour Party. The introduction tells us that he missed only one General Management Committee meeting in thirteen years, a remarkable record for a Scottish MP, but is otherwise silent on his local activities. His constituents need not feel aggrieved: there is not one recent study of a Scottish MP's constituency role, whether as part of a biography or of a study of local politics. MPs, it seems, are elected and depart to London, and that is all there is to say of them. Even Bealey and Sewel's study of Peterhead, The Politics of Independence, which is well aware of the MP's potential local importance, has only a couple of pages on Robert Boothby, its Tory MP for 34 years, and like Mackintosh an idiosyncratic MP with a strong interest in the special problems of his constituency.

The focus of Bealey and Sewel is instead Peterhead Council and its interaction with the local political arena. In particular they attempt to explain why the Council should for so long have exhibited what they call the 'politics of independence': domination by Independent councillors, largely self-recruited from a very narrow social base, with an ethos (at least in their own eyes) of non-partisan government and municipal thrift. Since the authors completed their data gathering some ten years ago, before the reform of Scottish local government, and since their inspiration is all too clearly to be found in the American enquiries into small-town politics of the 1950's, their study may seem to have a largely antiquarian interest. Bealey and Sewel are sensitive to this problem, perhaps unduly so, in rather feebly defending themselves with the comment that "smalltown government exists elsewhere and who is to say that it will not return to Scotland or Britain?". This may seem a remarkably agnostic position for a prominent Labour councillor and activist within the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, but there is much more to the book than such questions, for we have been provided with an unusually rich study of local politics, equally significant in understanding three important questions: the relationship between politics and society; the nature of Scottish politics; and the impact of oil.

Peterhead's Independent councillors are close cousins to the Progressives studied in Glasgow by Brand and in Dundee by Goulbourne. In these cities, however, the Progressives were increasingly opposed in local elections by Labour candidates, from the thirties on (giving the Labour Party in Scotland a peculiarly municipal character, as Harvie points out). In Peterhead there was only sporadic Labour activity, and after the 1940's there were virtually no official Labour candidates or councillors. The council had very few working class members, and pursued a policy of high council house rents and low rates, in line with its class composition. Yet the town had sharp social divisions, and a large working class with distinct social organisations and housing tenure. Thus the analysis of the 'politics of independence' must be concerned with the question of why the bulk of Peterhead's population should have failed to be represented in its main political institution. Bealey and Sewel contrast the cohesion of Peterhead's middle class and small business elite with the diff-

erentiation of its working class by religion, occupation and housing tenure, and point out that both strata were strongly influenced by apathetic attitudes to Peterhead's general powerlessness and by a disinclination to create social discord in so small a town through institutionalised political conflict.

The comparative implications of this material for the study of Scottish (as opposed to smalltown) politics are considerable. Although Peterhead itself would be hard to duplicate, the factors Bealey and Sewel mention can be found in other studies of Scottish local politics, as they make clear in their references to Dyer's massive doctorate on Kincardineshire. Similarly, their exploration of the political sociology of the town, and their chapter on the history and organisation of its local parties provide us with further evidence to test and elaborate the various available analyses of the rise of nationalism or the decline of conservative voting, to take but two examples. Thus they make clear that the local SNP drew heavily on those who shared the non-partisan ideology of council politics, and also that the Conservatives, despite holding the parliamentary seat until 1974, were organisationally and socially weak, making them easy to displace.

The system described in The Politics of Independence largely disappeared in the 1970's: Independent councillors declined in importance, as did their social base in general, while the working class became better organised and more active, at least at the union level. It is tempting to link this with the establishment of the town as one of the centres of the oil industry in the Northeast, with Bealey and Sewel's study giving us a detailed benchmark against which to measure and assess change. Professor Robert Moore of Aberdeen uses it thus in his The Social Impact of Oil, based on research carried out in 1976-78. Moore originally set out to study migrant labour in Peterhead, and his book still bears the marks of this narrow focus, having more to say of external factors than of Peterhead itself. Comparison between the two accounts is thus less fruitful than one might have expected, especially in the field of local politics. The study is also less fruitful than its author might have hoped. Not only was the impact of oil less clear-cut and one-sided than many had predicted in the early seventies, but it also proved

difficult to reach theoretical conclusions of any weight from studying it. Part of the difficulty lay in the very nature of Peterhead, its smallness and lack of power. There is little point in enquiring whether the changes wrought by oil can be analysed in terms of the theory of dependency if - as Moore finally says - "Peterhead has always been dependent". Moore concludes that he was wrong to conceive his study in such terms, and should instead have focussed on politics - on "inter- and intra-class conflicts...and the role of the state in representing and mediating these conflicts" in the particular context of oil development. This is refreshingly self-critical yet it implies that the value of the text now lies mainly in its empirical content. This is concerned primarily with four aspects of impact: the growth of speculation in land, the planning process, the political and economic consequences of the arrival of new firms and markets, and the social impact of incoming labour and of new local employment opportunities, notably those for women. All are well told, and there are interesting parallels in each case with other oil impact studies, or with studies of state policy and action in Scotland (of, for example, planning enquiries, or the rationale and effect of regional policy). Moore seems, however, unconcerned with these parallels; perhaps their exploration would have given greater substance to what is in the end a frustrating and inconclusive book for both author and reader.

A great deal of the literature on Scottish nationalism, where it is not simply justificatory or descriptive, relies on single-factor explanations and conceives its subject narrowly, in terms of nationalist organisation, or electoral support. To a lesser degree this has also been true of the general literature on nationalism, making it difficult to apply usefully to Scotland. Both Anthony Smith's latest study, The Ethnic Revival, and Colin Williams' collection, National Separatism, claim to offer more comprehensive interpretations of contemporary nationalism, either in general as with Smith, or in the specific case of neo-nationalist movements in industrialised countries, as with Williams. Neither sets out to be particularly original, for Smith's volume is part of a series on 'themes in the social sciences' and thus draws heavily on his earlier work, while Williams' collection not only has a chapter by Smith but is otherwise made up of authors who have already published extensively in

their fields. This results in both books being concise, wide-ranging, and in their own way authoritative, with Smith's global and historical approach being complemented by the half dozen case studies which make up the main part of Williams (on Ireland, Wales, Scotland, Belgium, Quebec and the Basques).

Each volume critically surveys the existing theoretical literature, paying special attention to the work of Gellner, Nairn and Hechter, before offering their own interpretations. Those in the Williams collection are more diverse, specific and yet wide-ranging than is that of Smith, though Williams himself is influenced by Smith, and both volumes place a strong emphasis on cultural variables, notably ethnic identity. Thus Williams argues that conventional theories show a "neglect of indigenous ethnolinguistic vitality" and have tended to rely over much on economic variables. It is not hard to agree with this, but at the same time Smith in particular so uses the apparently descriptive term 'ethnic' that at times he takes the role of ethnicity for granted instead of proving and explaining it. Thus he is at his most convincing in dealing with his central theme, the role of the peripheral or minority intelligentsia in ethnic mobilisation. Here he argues that the dominant state and culture cause them to suffer at once from cultural discrimination and from "thwarted mobility and professional discontent", giving rise to the growth of ethnic consciousness and to its politicization. He is, however, much less persuasive when it comes to explaining how the rest of the population is mobilised and what part - if any - is played in their case by ethnic identity and loyalty. Thus in his chapter on neo-nationalism the causal factors that Smith advances for the "timing and location of the current ethnic resurgence" are almost all concerned with the changing status, prospects or ideologies of minority intelligentsias. Of the rest of the population, who provide what mass support such movements enjoy and whose support alone might justify the use of the term 'ethnic resurgence', he has only this to say:

"This explains why the rise of 'mass' support for ethnic autonomy movements in the 1960s occurred when it did;... by that time, it had become plain that the rival class-based parties could not, or would not, cater to minority needs..."

Smith is therefore most useful and enlightening in examining the social basis of nationalist parties, especially the place within them of the intelligentsia and the consequent ideological divisions

within the parties themselves, currently all too visible in the SNP. Williams' collection is rather more concerned with the origins and extent of popular support for nationalist movements, and with the influence on them and their supporters of the response of central government and central institutions to their demands. These are the main themes in Donald MacIver's two chapters; he provides a separate short discussion of the latter, and it occurs also in his long chapter on Scottish nationalism. In this he attempts to explain the 'paradox' that "Scotland has a clearly defined territory and strong sense of national identity, but a traditionally weak and ambiguous political nationalism". Like Nairn (who however sees the phenomenon as pathological rather than paradoxical) he sees this as the product of the experience of Union, on the one hand preserving Scottish identity and on the other creating a 'conditional legitimacy' for Union, based on the benefits gained from it.

Such a perspective throws a rather different light on the contribution of cultural variables to Scottish nationalism than those of Smith or Williams. While the reproduction of cultural and national identity remain necessary conditions for nationalism, they do not play a determinant role, and hence do not figure in MacIver's account of the rise of nationalism. Instead he turns to the other half of the legacy of Union, and argues that once its benefits are seen to be in decline there is initially a demand for home rule and, more recently, support for nationalism. This support is not, however, an instance of Williams' "powerful expression of group identity and of social regeneration among culturally distinct peripheral collectivities", but an attempt at "restoring the effectiveness of the union partnership". Thus not only does Scottish nationalism, according to MacIver, derive little of its impetus from 'ethnic resurgence' but we are left with another paradox - that to be successful in electoral terms, it must not appear to be too likely to achieve its main goal - the end of Union.

REFERENCE

1. A more detailed version of the influence of this factor is contained in W. Miller, J. Brand & M. Jordan, Oil and the Scottish Voter (Glasgow: North Sea Oil Panel, 1980)