

REVIEW:
THE AUTONOMY OF MODERN SCOTLAND

James G Kellas

Lindsay Paterson. **The Autonomy of Modern Scotland**, Edinburgh:
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211pp.

Every so often a book comes along which changes the way we look at things. Such a book is Lindsay Paterson's **The Autonomy of Modern Scotland**. According to Paterson, the assumption that Scotland has not been independent since 1707 is wrong. Scotland has had 'autonomy', which is a kind of independence, even if it does not have a Parliament and Government.

That is new thinking, and this is not just a book about Scotland. It is a comparative study, including European countries, the USA, and Canada. The conclusion is that in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries 'Scotland's autonomy was closer to the partial independence of Norway, Finland or Hungary' than to the dependent condition of the Czech lands or Poland. In the twentieth century Scotland 'has had a similar degree of autonomy to the component parts of formal federations such as Germany, the USA or Canada' (p.5).

If this were true it would indeed be a major discovery. In 1973 I wrote a book called **The Scottish Political System**, which argued that Scotland, although it did not have a Parliament or Government, did have a political system with a degree of independence. That was too much for some academic critics at the time, including John P. Mackintosh, Richard Rose, and later Michael Keating and Arthur Midwinter. They could not accept that Scotland had any

James Kellas is Professor of Politics, University of Glasgow.

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independence or even autonomy (though I did not use that word) in the British political system.

Now Paterson has gone further than I did, and I welcome his positive approach, which contrasts with that of traditionalists in the academic world and in real politics. Both of these traditionalist types are thirled to the formal structures of states, sovereignty, federalism and devolution when dealing with Scotland. They all say that if Scotland does not have its own Government and Parliament it cannot have any kind of independence, autonomy, or even a political system. It is good to see Paterson making short work of these blinkers.

Paterson is not a comparative political scientist, and he works in the Centre for Educational Sociology in the University of Edinburgh. He is also the editor of this journal. He says in an interesting personal section that in the early 1980s he inhabited three worlds 'that seemed barely to connect with each other', the Scottish theatre, 'the dejected activities of leftist politicians', and policy-related academic research and teaching. So he comes with a refreshing originality to the subject.

Yet I must confess to being somewhat mystified. How could Scotland have been independent since 1707 when it clearly was not? Could those who have been struggling for a Scottish Parliament since the 1880s have been wrong all along? Would devolution or independence make no difference?

Well, Paterson does not say that. Like myself, he wants a Scottish Parliament, and is not at all happy with 'the status quo'. To a large extent, that is a legacy of his 'leftist activities' faced with the Thatcher and Major Governments since 1979, but it is also a result of changing national consciousness in Scotland. While Paterson is right to locate 'autonomy' in operation in Scotland since 1707, there was also a strong sense of Britishness when that autonomy was at its most independent in law, education, local government, and religion. That autonomy has shrunk, but so has Britishness. One has only to look at the mastheads of the newspapers on sale in Scotland to see that Scottishness is more important now than it was in the days of 'North Britain' (the North British Hotels in Edinburgh and Glasgow disappeared only in the 1980s). Cultural Scottishness is rampant, but political autonomy has virtually gone. Some of what I originally wrote in **The Scottish Political System** is now out-of-date, because much political decision-making has been centralised in London, or in the Tory enclave of the Scottish Office, whereas before Thatcher it was spread throughout Scotland. The Scottish 'system' exists, but its autonomy has diminished. Paterson accepts this, and wants to change it to

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something else, but he does not know what exactly, whether 'home rule' or independence.

His main interest is in the Scottish past, and in comparisons with other places. Let's leave the others to one side for the moment. It is true that Scotland has gone through several political systems since 1707, of varying degrees of autonomy. But I doubt if any of the participants in, or observers of, these systems would recognise Paterson's description of them. They were keenly aware that in the United Kingdom, Scotland was in a minority, and that England was the predominant partner. Unionists of all parties accepted this as a price to pay for the benefits of Union, while nationalists and devolutionists did not. The difference between having a Parliament and Government in Scotland, and not having one, was important at all times, if not totally a condition of the presence of the Scottish political system. Yes, there was a Scottish 'civil society', as there is now, but 'politics' is about votes, seats, Parliaments, Governments, law-making, 'who gets what', and so on. The mechanics of Scottish government are inextricably linked into the British system, albeit they make up a system of a kind. The test is what kind of power, what kind of negotiations, and what kind of decisions resulted, and I fear that generally Scotland was in a state of dependence on London, all the more so when London chose to exert its power in a dictatorial way. Yes, we have heard from Mr Major and Mr Lang of the 'partnership of the peoples' of Britain, but we know what that means in terms of the poll tax, local government reorganisation, education changes, etc. And there is nothing new here. In my youth, I did a Ph.D on the Liberal Party in Scotland, 1885-95. During that period, a Conservative Government imposed local government reforms on Scotland against the wishes of a majority of the Scottish MPs, and would not support the majority Scottish Liberal policy of Scottish Home Rule (mind you, neither did Gladstone nor Rosebery, but then they were British politicians!). So it's 'an auld sang'.

The international comparisons are intriguing, but not very convincing. I wonder why Norway, the Czech Republic, Hungary, etc. are independent states today, and Catalonia, Bavaria, Quebec, etc are functioning states in federations, while Scotland has none of this? Could it be that they all had parliaments, diets, or assemblies, when Scotland did not, and that these institutions were the real cards to play in the autonomy stakes, unlike 'civil society'? They could represent and negotiate in a way Scotland could not and cannot. That is not to say that Scotland will not move forward to political autonomy and independence, but it is more difficult without a Parliament and Government, especially when the voters and elites hold back, as they do.

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All this is grist to the mill of debate, and many will be convinced by Paterson. The main thing is that here is a book which marks the contours of that debate, and ought to be on the reading-list of all students of Scottish politics, history and sociology, as well as of politicians, administrators, lawyers...in fact, everyone north and south of the Border.

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