

## **CONCLUSION: DOES NATIONALISM MATTER?**

*Lindsay Paterson*

Asking whether nationalism matters often strikes people in the real world as a typically academic quibble. Obviously, they feel, it does. It has not only outlasted communism; it helped to bring it down, insofar as resentment at Soviet (or, in fact, Russian) domination was one of the central motives for the rebellions that swept eastern and central Europe in the late 1980s. It continues to frustrate any tendency there might be in capitalism towards a truly world economy, as distinct from a system of interlinked national economies, one in which - moreover - the national interests of the richer countries tend to be aggressively in charge: 'globalisation' and 'internationalisation' are not the same thing (Hirst and Thompson 1996). And nationalism of a particularly nasty sort continues to face minority peoples everywhere - Blacks and Asians in Britain, Turks in Germany, Hutus or Tutsis in Rwanda and Burundi.

Yet the question does make sense, and the articles on Quebec and Catalonia published in this issue of **Scottish Affairs** illustrate why it needs to be asked.

### **THE DECAY OF CLASSICAL NATIONALISM**

On the face of it, however, these countries do seem to provide straightforward instances of nationalism in its classical form. Both enjoy a high degree of formal political autonomy, in the sense that they possess elected legislatures and have their special status recognised in the constitutions of the states in which they are embedded. Thus Catalonia (along

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with the Basque Country) has greater powers than the other autonomous communities of Spain, and - because of its fortunate geographical position at one end of the so-called 'banana region' that stretches round southern France to Tuscany - is uniquely privileged within Spain in its access to European markets and therefore European influence. Quebec, too, has considerable national autonomy, achieved - like Catalonia - as a result of frequent national assertions. Quebec assertion has never satisfied the more militant nationalists - insofar as it has not led to independent statehood - but it has continued to remind the wider Canadian state that Quebec is different and needs different treatment.

But, from another point of view, Quebec and Catalonia show the limits of nationalism. Set alongside the different experience of other small countries - such as Scotland - theirs can alternatively be interpreted as showing that nationalism in its classical form is actually ceasing to matter.

Classical nationalism can be described as the retrospectively reconstructed ideology of nineteenth-century nationalist movements. The key idea is that the nation is not truly itself until it is fully independent, in political, cultural, and historical senses. In the famous words of Ernest Renan (writing in 1882, reprinted by Hutchinson and Smith 1994, p.17):

to have accomplished great things together, to wish to do so again, that is the essential condition for being a nation.

A common history thus inspires a common project, and to realise that requires a common political life: 'the existence of a nation is an everyday plebiscite'.

The remarkable fact about the actual development of small nations in the century since Renan wrote is that most of them have not had a fully independent political life - their 'everyday plebiscites' have not been the only font of the sovereignty that has power in their territory - and yet most of them have maintained a common culture and have been increasingly attached to a common past. The days of the Enlightenment neglect of history had already been left behind by the century in which Renan was active. This point is as true of partially independent nations such as Catalonia or Quebec as it is of apparently completely dependent ones such as Scotland.

Take Catalonia. As Moreno and Arriba show in this issue of **Scottish Affairs**, a sense of national identity - of a common culture - remains strong.

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This is partly because the language and traditions of the country have been fostered by the Catalan government since 1980, but that such a culture was still alive to be fostered owed almost nothing at all to national political autonomy. It rested ultimately on the nineteenth-century workings of Catalan civil society, developing Barcelona as the industrial leader in Spain, and giving the Catalan-speaking middle class a mission to modernise Spain as a whole (Giner 1980; Keating 1996). It rested later also on the sustained civil-society opposition to Franco's centralised regime, which left a legacy of support for political autonomy in the 1970s. In fact, then, independent statehood was never available as a memory for Catalan nationalists, and even limited autonomy could be remembered only from the brief republican interlude in the 1930s: their political project had to be for the present and the future. Even today - as Parés notes - the institutions of civil society are at least as important in maintaining a distinct Catalan nation as is the autonomous government - institutions such as a separate media. The nationalists have, in any case, effectively given up on national independence in current historical circumstances (Keating 1996). What matters to the hard-headed business people of Barcelona is doing deals in Europe, and what matters to the left-of-centre majority is the social Europe which the Maastricht Treaty seems to promise.

Something the same is true of Quebec, whatever the official line of the Parti Québécois and its allies might be. The 'French fact' of north America might be facilitated by a separate Quebec state, but it will rest ultimately on the daily cultural activities of Québécois citizens. As Tremblay notes at the end of his article:

In light of the importance of current challenges, [the survival of Quebec culture] will depend on the attachment of Quebecers themselves, individually and collectively, and their determination to provide the necessary resources and creative talent at their disposition.

Lacroix - like Parés for Catalonia - comments on the importance of the media in sustaining national identity. Governments can create conditions in which national life might flourish or decay; but - as Stenhouse says of Scottish arts policy elsewhere in this issue of **Scottish Affairs** - 'a successful arts policy can't produce good art. Art is by nature unpredictable, mutable and non-rational and it isn't made by Arts policy makers', although bad policy might help to destroy it.

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This example of Scotland illustrates the point the other way round. If the cultural identity of Quebec and Catalonia depends more on civil society than on their semi-autonomous governments, then that of Scotland cannot help but do so, lacking as the country does the formal political autonomy which these other places enjoy. Cultural identity in Scotland is at least as strong as in Catalonia and Quebec. For example - using the categories quoted by Moreno and Arriba, and which Moreno himself pioneered in his path-breaking comparison of Scotland and Catalonia in 1986 - whereas 36% of residents of Catalonia in the early 1990s saw themselves as mainly or exclusively Catalan, a much larger 64% of residents of Scotland feel mainly or exclusively Scottish (Brown et al 1996, p.210). Although Scotland obviously does not have a separate broadcasting system along the lines of - say - the French, it can be argued that the essentially federal relationship among the component parts of the BBC (or among the ITV companies) offers the best that could be hoped for, given the small size of the Scottish market. As Macinnes has argued, 'good television and radio is expensive: a hard fact for small countries to swallow' (Macinnes 1994, p.139). The Scottish print media is in fact much more distinct than is the print media in Catalonia. And Scottish culture more widely has been flourishing since the 1970s at a time when the country's political autonomy has never (since the seventeenth century) been so severely circumscribed.

So, to ask whether nationalism matters or not is not at all to doubt that the nation has ceased to matter - quite the opposite. As McCrone argues in his article, national *identity* remains a prime reference point amidst the current general crisis of identity. My question is, rather, about the *politics* of the nation. It is to question whether nationalism of a classical sort is any longer the main route to national development. This form of questioning is similar to that popularised in 1990 by Hobsbawm, for whom nationalism was dead because it could no longer contribute to modernisation, its only historical function. But my point is different from his: to argue that nationalism is dead because of the death of what is judged to be its main function is rather like arguing that written language is redundant because books are being replaced by electronic media.

### **NATIONALISM AND PLURALISM**

From that point come different conclusions. One is the rather obvious one that, like books, modernisation still has some way to go, despite what Hobsbawm the Marxist might like to believe (Hobsbawm the subtle historian

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is quite another matter). Nationalism in Scotland, for instance, may well be the route to modernising UK state structures, just as nationalism in Catalonia (and other parts) helped to get rid of the obsolete structures of Franco's Spain. But the more important conclusion is that nationalism might serve some new social purposes that have themselves begun to supersede modernisation - purposes of individualism and multiple identities, of the sort outlined by McCrone.

The striking feature of both the Catalan and the Quebecois cases as discussed by the contributors to this issue of **Scottish Affairs** is that multiple identities are now an accepted fact of politics. This is most obvious in Catalonia, where the main nationalist party - CiU - has had to accept the reality of large-scale immigration, and has therefore had to develop a form of Catalan identity that is not intrinsically opposed to identities associated with other places. The capacity of the CiU members of the Spanish Cortes to reach deals with both the Socialists and the Right suggests that the nationalists have taken this lesson to heart: 'ourselves alone' is now, throughout Europe, a quite literally absurd proposition, because no-one can coherently define a 'we' who could conceivably be isolated. The only serious attempt to implement such a policy in current conditions - in Bosnia - is bound to fail even for its supposed beneficiaries (and is bound, tragically, to cause enormous misery en route to failure).

Multiple identities are also found in Quebec, most notably in the fairly enthusiastic acceptance of the North American Free Trade Area as an alternative international focus to that of Canada, but also in the indisputably North American aspects of Quebecois culture - not least, the use of television and of commercial opportunities from the USA. Scotland is, of course, well-known for the apparent uncertainty of its sense of identity - Scottish as well as British, and now European as well: in 1992, only 19% of people living in Scotland identified themselves as exclusively Scottish (and only 3% as exclusively British); the rest associated themselves with a mixture of Scottishness and Britishness (Brown et al 1996, pp.199-200). What is less well publicised is that multiple identities can be found not only among the supporters of home rule or of the home rule parties (Labour and the Liberal Democrats), but also among people who choose independence (only 36% exclusively Scottish in 1992) or vote SNP (also 36%).

It may be that the key to understanding this is in Anthony Cohen's useful concept of 'personal nationalism' (1994). Thus national identity is now not so much an allegiance to some over-arching collective project, but rather a way

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of 'presenting the self' (Goffman 1973), with roughly the same function as identities based on gender, ethnicity, or - even - social class. Thus to say that I am male is only in small part to adhere to a vast edifice of conventional masculinity. It is only an introduction to an identity-statement. It requires, now, expansion: what kind of male, with what kind of relationship to femininity and to feminism, and rooted in which national, ethnic, and class cultures? Class identity, similarly, can be a choice, a statement of allegiance, so that we find the Scottish middle class, for instance, anxious to assert its working-class credentials in order to escape being labelled as Tory (a party which is in power largely thanks to the middle-class chosen identity of upwardly-mobile working-class people in southern England).

In this context, then, saying that I am Scottish is asserting a qualified choice, one that immediately requires the addition of further information. The Scotland to which, say, Christianson adheres in her discussion of gender and identity in this issue of **Scottish Affairs** is not the same Scotland as, say, that of William MacIlvanney. That has always been the case, but it now cannot be avoided by nationalism in the ways that were common in the past. Nationalism can no longer assume that there is one true national identity, one 'national soul' (Renan again).

But, if nationalism matters now because it is an extension of 'identity politics', what about the political project with which it is usually associated? Catalonia shows that state independence may be unnecessary. For Quebec, the opposite may turn out to be true some day, although it has to be said that, so far, independence has not yet been the choice in a referendum (and - if that is because of what the former Quebec premier Parizeau notoriously called 'the ethnic vote' - the point is that all nations now have ethnic minorities big enough to force recognition of their cultures in the 'national' identity).

Scottish nationalism is on the cusp in this respect: the promised referendum from a Blair government raises the whole question of whether the people will actually choose Labour's form of autonomy or will prefer something else. The something else could conceivably be the unreformed institutions of the UK rather than the SNP's version, although, on balance, it still seems likely that a degree of autonomy will indeed be the preferred option. But, whatever happens, one thing will be absolutely clear. The victory will be to those who successfully argue for their vision of Scottish national identity - successfully attach the new project of personal nationalism to a particular constitutional form. The outcome of this dispute is by no means pre-determined. Michael Forsyth's version is as authentic and potentially popular as the Constitutional

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Convention's or the SNP's. What unites them, remarkably from the point of view of classical nationalism, is an acceptance of nationalism as the framing context for their politics: we are all nationalists now (something which, incidentally, the self-consciously English John Major seems to understand rather better than the deracinated Tony Blair).

So the point is not that the classical project of nationalism is completely at an end: nationalism will continue to lead, sometimes, to autonomy or even statehood. But nationalism has changed in the sense that these are not any longer the main reasons why it continues to matter, in fact if not in ideology. People seem to want to use it pragmatically, to negotiate in the international economy, or to extract resources from a central state, or - above all - to give their identity a cultural anchor. These activities have always been part of nationalism (Paterson 1994; Smith 1991): the classical nationalist ideology was a retrospective simplification, not a social-scientific description. The change is one of emphasis, in response to a more inter-dependent and culturally plural world. But it is an important change nonetheless, because it makes nationalism available to current politics in ways that socialism and - especially - communism are not. These other nineteenth-century ideologies have not yet successfully adapted to the individualistic and relativistic world that, somewhat ironically, the socialist-inspired welfare states themselves helped to create (Giddens 1994; Miliband 1994; Sassoon 1996).

If people say, then, that of course nationalism matters, they are recognising first of all that it speaks to a sense of identity, and offers a way of linking that identity to practical politics. Much further down their agenda of nationalism comes the seeking of state independence. The highly successful autonomous government of Catalonia shows what astute politicians can do with these sentiments - how Renan's aim of creating a cultural community can be furthered in a multiplicity of ways.

When Quebec rejects even a highly qualified form of statehood, or when Catalan nationalists more-or-less abandon independence - and if Scotland continues to be ambivalent even about home rule - that does not signal the death of the nation or of its nationalism. It demonstrates, rather, the very success of nationalism: its embedding in practices such as in the pragmatic business of everyday government, or in the search for a variety of identities with which we all now try to make sense of our world.

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