

REVIEW: THE STATE AND THE NATIONS

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Stephen Tindale (ed.) (1996), **The State and the Nations: the Politics of Devolution**, London: IPPR, pb, £11.95, ISBN 1860300251, 221 pages.

Devolution is perhaps the most controversial issue in British politics today. Some commentators claim that home rule for Scotland and Wales will cause economic decline and the break-up of the Union. IPPR takes issue with this: devolution could be a trigger for democratic renewal, economic expansion and the long-term strengthening of ties between the constituent parts of the United Kingdom.

That is the basic premise on which this book is founded, but it is neither a propaganda exercise nor a mere group of essays. As the culmination of a series of seminars and lectures, it displays a certain intellectual rigour in having identified problem areas and focussed discussion upon these. It does not attempt to avoid or disguise the contentious issues, and it does not pretend that devolution will automatically present us with answers to all of our economic and social problems. What it succeeds in doing is giving a wide (if not completely comprehensive) description of the field and the accommodations which might have to be made. It is particularly relevant to our own present considerations as three chapters are devoted to Scotland and every one of its eight chapters makes some mention of the Scottish experience. IPPR is, of course, the Institute for Public Policy Research which was set up in 1988 with the avowed intention of providing an alternative to the free market think-tanks and whose trustees are establishment figures of the left - or, more exactly in these New Labour days, of the slightly left of centre.

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In the last fifty years a devolution movement has moved across Europe as more communities have pushed for the decentralisation of power and the greater involvement of the citizen in the processes of government. That movement has come late to our shores. A good first step to take when considering the forms of devolution which might successfully be introduced into the UK is the examination of the development of decentralised powers elsewhere in Europe. This is done here in a chapter entitled 'Regional government in western Europe' by John Hopkins, dealing with France, Italy, Spain and Germany, looking at their respective responsibilities, funding arrangements, tax-raising powers and vertical relationships of national, regional and local governments. It is clear, even from this small sample, that Europe can supply a variety of successful examples of decentralisation and how this may take place with different structures and at different rates within the same country - which counters many of the arguments used against devolution in this country. Hopkins recognises that the support for the decentralising of power has been more widespread in the countries of the EU than it has in the UK. The spirit of goodwill towards devolution which this reflects has meant that the anomaly created by overlapping rights of regional governments to discuss issues in the national government which no longer apply to them (a form of 'West Lothian Question') is 'a non-issue in Europe'. Similarly, as long as an openly agreed formula for security of funding to give financial independence is established, 'taxation is not a major issue'.

Neither of these conclusions gives much in the way of consolation to supporters of devolution in this country confronted by those presently holding power within the Westminster system, who are distrustful of any diminution of the sovereignty of the Crown-in-Parliament. However, Hopkins has demonstrated that, given the political will, devolution can work, and introduces the first of the two main themes of this book, the issues which must be confronted when setting up a devolved structure: these issues are the powers to be devolved, the funding of the new body, and its relationships with central government (including a mechanism for the resolution of demarcation disputes) and the 'West Lothian Question'. One other observation which has importance for the Scottish scene is that, from an examination of the various funding arrangements, Hopkins concludes that the power of regional governments is not related to their powers to raise taxes.

The other main theme which this book follows is IPPR's view that three stages of devolution can be identified: an indirectly-elected assembly with powers of scrutiny and a strategic planning role (something to dilute the worst excesses of the quango state); a directly-elected council with an

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executive role; and a parliament with legislative and perhaps tax-raising powers. These might roughly fit the devolution requirements for the English Regions, Wales and Scotland respectively and this is the plan which the book follows until its final chapter.

In his chapter on devolution in the English regions, 'Devolution on demand - options for the English regions and London', Stephen Tindale makes it clear that it is not intended that there should be a completely rigid interpretation of this plan, as regions might wish to move at different paces to take over executive functions. London and the North East, for example, would almost certainly wish to do so fairly quickly. However, he believes that before moving to a directly elected Assembly the approval of the electorate must be sought through a referendum. Despite the caveats about having freedom to move up the devolution ladder, this is a minimalist approach which is almost devolution by evolution, and it is vigorously opposed in the final chapter of the book, 'Regional government - an economic imperative' by Phil Murphy and Richard Caborn. Their argument is that elected regional governments are necessary for effective economic planning and regeneration within England, and are needed now. Indeed, they make the point that the debate about the English Regions has been 'smothered beneath the row about Scottish and Welsh devolution'. Their arguments have merit, and although this is not in line with IPPR's preferred programme of political devolution, this would have been a better balanced book if both chapters on the English regions had been placed side by side.

Wales clearly has to be considered as something other than a region. However, although no one who favours devolution would suggest that Wales should have anything less than an elected Assembly, the apparently lukewarm attitude of the Welsh people to devolution in the past makes outsiders hesitant to suggest more. The contribution by Gerald Holtham and Elizabeth Barrett on this topic, 'The head and the heart - devolution and Wales', is especially welcome in this circumstance as they give an exceedingly clear and rather touching description of the economic, linguistic and political divisions within Wales and how these are represented in geographic terms. Their analysis of the breakdown of Welsh society in all its aspects during the 70s and 80s lends credibility to their belief that the best programme for Wales would involve the early establishment of a Welsh Senedd - elected by the Single Transferable Vote to give the elector more power than the political parties. The expectation is, of course, that the Welsh people would in time choose to have the Senedd become an autonomous parliament. One was left with the feeling that devolution might well be what

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is needed to unify Welsh society and justify IPPR's claim that it will strengthen the ties between the constituent parts of the United Kingdom.

In IPPR's preferred design, Scotland is the only part of the UK which would move directly to its own parliament. In his chapter 'Constitutional reform in the UK' James Cornford gives a general survey of the changes which have led to an increasing dissatisfaction with the present system and the major questions which have to be considered in establishing a new internal relationship within the UK. All of the contributors to the chapters on Scotland accept the Scottish Constitutional Convention's scheme as a starting point with certain exceptions. There is general agreement that the scheme should be amended to give Parliament a power of general competence, so that only those matters which will be retained by Westminster should be specified. They defend the decision to give tax-varying powers and regret that assigned revenues have been dropped from the 1995 scheme, described by David Heald and Neal Geaghan in their chapter 'Financing a Scottish Parliament' as 'agreed under pressure from the Labour front bench ... in a panicky political atmosphere' - Amen to that! Every possible impediment which might be put in the way of the establishing legislation is comprehensively reviewed by Wendy Alexander and James McCormick in 'Firm foundations - securing the Scottish Parliament'. They sift through the four main proposed solutions to the West Lothian Question and, in particular, the proposals for a reduction of the number of Scottish MPs sitting in Westminster - while recognising that the Question could disappear with the introduction of electoral reform throughout the UK. Of course they do not always get things right. Alexander and McCormick were encouraged by the attitude being taken by the Scottish CBI who, at the time of going to press, were refraining from taking an official position on the constitutional options. They might have expected that under increasing pressure as the election draws nearer such an attitude was unlikely to be sustained. Their second misjudgment could be forgiven - their recognition of Labour's firm commitment to the establishment of a Scottish parliament without recourse to a referendum. After spending five pages on the arguments for and against a referendum and the form which it might take, they judge that, 'Scotland's experience in 1979 was an unhappy one and the weight of argument is firmly against even appearing to revisit it'. How very unfortunate that this message should have been so arrogantly ignored by Labour's recent unilateral decision that a pre-legislative referendum would be held. And such a referendum!

The change in Labour's commitment to that Convention agreement without previous consultation with their Convention partners inevitably draws

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attention to those aspects of the proposals which have been given little airing in this book. It is rather disappointing, for example, that apart from reference to the possible effects of proportional representation and consensus in Alexander and McCormick's projections about the Parliament there is no consideration given to the envisaged devolution of power within the Parliament. Perhaps this is not to be wondered at. One of the lasting memories for those who attended the first meeting of the Scottish Constitutional Convention was the sight of so many Westminster MPs taking to the rostrum to declare that Scotland's Parliament must not be a copy of Westminster. Unfortunately, despite this open recognition by working MPs that Westminster was undemocratic and inefficient, neither of the two largest United Kingdom political parties has seriously evaluated the need for constitutional reform and included these as essential planks in their platforms. The proposals of the Convention scheme, if implemented, will go some way to ensuring that the day of what Iain McWhirter has described as 'brain-dead lobby fodder' is reaching its end. The even more exciting opportunity afforded by the proposed Committee system to establish an interactive relationship with appropriate local authorities, business groups, planning agencies, trade unions and civic organisations is given no mention. The final section of Alexander and McCormick's chapter looks to the first ten years of a Scottish Parliament and conjectures about the possible effects of devolution on the individual political parties in Scotland and on future inter-party relationships. All good stuff if rather reminiscent of late-night conversations in Conference bars. However, it would have been at least as useful to conjecture about a parliament without a lobby system, without whips and with a reformed cabinet structure. Devolution, after all, has to be about something more than setting up a legislature to deal with local affairs. In the course of the **Herald's** business debate on devolution last autumn, the managing director of Radio Clyde, James Gordon, concluded, 'empowerment makes sense for the country as well as for business'. How right he was. For all its professional, well-researched approach and the enthusiasm and commitment of its contributors, it is this touch of soul which the book lacks.

In all fairness, this book does what it sets out to do and does it pretty well. For those who are coming fresh to the devolution question - a Scot returning from an eighteen year exile, say - it gives a useful overview of the current arguments, and provides, should one need them, counters to the more blatant assertions of the anti-devolutionist. Within Scotland, it should continue to have relevance during 1997 as the possibility of a new government with a promise to fulfil occupies most of media attention. Within the UK, if the

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devolution movement gains the right momentum, it should very quickly be out of date.

November 1996