

REVIEW: A PARTNERSHIP FOR GOOD?

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R.J.Finlay, **A Partnership for Good?: Scottish Politics and the Union Since 1880**. Edinburgh: John Donald, pb, £14.95, ISBN 0859764117, 169pp.

Dr Finlay's analysis of the origins of the Scottish National Party in his earlier work, **Independent and Free**, is a model of clarity in a confused and contentious field, so he is well-equipped to examine the changing assessments of the political gains and losses of Scotland's place in the United Kingdom. His new study develops his earlier work in two directions. The first is an attempt to bring the story up to date. The result is somewhat disappointing, partly because the events are too recent for a satisfactory historical analysis and more because they are dealt with too cursorily. That said, the book is a good guide for anyone seeking a general introduction to the changing views of the Union over the last century, though for the period up to 1945 **Independent and Free** is to be preferred for most purposes. The second attempt to break new ground is an endeavour to get behind the often superficial grounds for criticising the Union to the fundamental reasons behind them. This is an enterprising but difficult task much neglected by those who comment on the Union. Finlay is fully entitled to criticise some writers for making complex historical experience fit preconceived simplistic theoretical models. Life is too complex. However, it is doubtful if even the best intentioned historian - author or reviewer - is free of preconceptions either.

The complexity is evident in the constant 'repackaging' of the issues which changed assessments of the good of the Union. The middle-class 'imperial sentiment, laissez faire Scottish past' looked favourably on the Union; so too did later working -class demands for an attack on social problems which seemed as likely to be realised within the Union as without. On the other hand the attention given to the Irish, even jealousy of that attention, worked

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in the opposite direction, as did the belief that the promised land of socialism might be reached more quickly in an independent Scotland. In modern times the degree of support for the Union and the reasons for it have been confused still further by the emergence of tactical voting on a large scale.

Through all the plethora of changing views, the outline of which is one of the strengths of the book, two main themes of criticism of the present constitutional arrangements can be identified. The first is that they inhibit the political expression of a distinct Scottish cultural identity. It is certainly a theme which attracts popular support, so long as there is no need to give it an exact meaning. As Finlay points out, a separate Scottish identity is 'a fluid and intangible concept which is hard to pin down with any degree of accuracy'. Scottish identity means what you say it means. Unfortunately, Finlay does not tackle two aspects of any assertion of national identity which seem to work against its deployment as an argument for political nationalism. The first is the confusion over those to whom any national characteristic can be applied, whatever it may be. Any national characteristic is more likely to apply to Scots by birth but the advocacy of political nationalism should be confined in a democratic society to Scots by residence. The two groups are not the same and the frequent use of the undefined term of Scots is confusing. The second aspect, which is usually ignored, follows. Why is it acceptable to assert cultural identity and independence as the basis for political separation at a time when multiculturalism is generally demanded as a prime test of political acceptability? Each of these questions would seem to rule out the possibility of using a separate cultural identity as the basis of demands for changes in the Union. Cultural and political identity is then more than fluid and intangible. It would seem to give rise to contradictions which need further examination.

Finlay shows that there is a less fluid and more tangible basis for questioning the good which comes from the Union, and one which avoids such awkward issues. It questions the effectiveness of the constitutional arrangements in promoting good government in Scotland. This is an approach which is more likely to appeal to the intellectual analysis of an academic mind than to the population at large and so to be less successful than the appeal to beliefs in the superiority of the Scots. However, defining better government is about as elusive as defining national identity. It cannot be restricted to the niceties of constitutional practice. The toils of the nationalists when some of them tried to mount campaigns on the basis of constitutional change alone provides confirmation. The textbooks of political scientists are unlikely to be as effective with the electorate as a rollicking manifesto, especially one which

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appeals to feelings of distinctiveness and especially of superiority. Something more has to be added and that usually means some discontent.

Some of the discontent diagnosed has been over trivial, almost indeed irrelevant matters, cases of injured local pride or the glorification of an inverted parochialism, but they are still issues which are capable of being exploited for some wider political objective. Such channeling of discontent in unexpected directions is evident in the ways in which nationalist parties have been able to muster support for rural issues, notably opposition to landowners in the Highlands, from an urbanised and industrial society where such issues might not have been expected to carry much weight. Even when the issues were far from trivial Finlay shows well that success came chiefly when a political party had a policy which could be portrayed as one which was likely to be realised only with some constitutional change. The fluctuating attitudes of the Labour party towards the Union is a striking example. Its support for some form of devolution was a variable dependent on the likelihood of the party's success in Westminster elections until the seeming remoteness of ever achieving power there drove it to wholehearted adoption of a policy which seemed to guarantee some more localised power in a political wilderness and from which any withdrawal was then impossible.

How support for devolution widened needs further explanation, especially the rejection of Conservatism leading to the support of Labour and the socialist-type policies of the Liberal Democrats and the SNP. Finlay sums up the situation in the 1970s in a bald statement, which is as applicable then as now, 'What the Scottish electorate appeared to want was more corporatism, more government intervention in the economy and more public expenditure'. Given that expectation, the political events of the next 20 years were inevitable. Finlay's assessment is convincing but it gives rise to a reflection on which it would have been instructive to have his views. When did this approach become characteristic of the Scottish electorate? It is far removed from the intellectual heritage from Scotland of the eighteenth century. It may be the result of the rise of a comfortably off middle class, who, the world over, like to be subsidised, but it may contain the seeds of its own undoing for, to quote **The Economist** of 23 August 1997, 'The biggest economic-policy mistake of the past 50 years, in the rich and poor countries alike, has been and still is to expect too much from government'.

Finlay rightly concludes that the creation of a parliament in Edinburgh has been elusive in the past and may well be so in the future. He should have taken his analysis a step further. Bringing a parliament into being is one thing, but if the expectations that lie behind its creation are unrealisable, or realisable only on the basis of accepting changes which the electorate in

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Scotland seems reluctant to accept even as the rest of the world would seem to be doing, then it will not only be elusive but unstable. That is an even bigger question but, as a historian, Finlay may reply that it is not his. Can it be side-stepped so easily? He may not have answered all the questions but he sets his readers thinking.

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