

REVIEW: EDUCATION IN SCOTLAND

Tony Gallagher

Margaret M. Clark and Pamela Munn (1997) (eds), **Education in Scotland: Policy and Practice from Pre-School to Secondary**, London: Routledge, pb, £11.99, ISBN 0415158362, pp.xv+186.

I attended a conference some years ago where one symposium was devoted to a discussion of future education policy in the United Kingdom, but most of the participants were from London and most of their discussion was on England. Unless you happen to be in the Celtic fringe, it is all too easy to forget that the highly centralised UK state has some very decentralised features. Admittedly this is probably mitigated by the recent referendums which laid the basis for devolved assemblies in Scotland and Wales, and the Political Agreement in Northern Ireland which restored a basis for devolution there too. This new situation of formal decentralisation is but one of a number of radical changes introduced by the New Labour government which have changed the political context of the UK and will undoubtedly change political discourse in the future. In the area of education it reminds of the comparative possibilities arising from the operation of four education systems within the UK. This makes the present book particularly timely and welcome, albeit some of the chapters appear to predate the May 1997 election, and most predate the Scottish referendum. The book nevertheless provides an important baseline for the future.

In part the value of the collection lies in the delineation of the distinct features of the Scottish education system, while at the same time highlighting areas of common interest and experience - although most of the points of comparison are with England alone. Thus, for example, Joyce Watt's discussion of pre-school education points out that demand outstrips supply, as in the rest of the United Kingdom. Margaret Clark discusses primary education and highlights some the distinctive paths taken in Scotland during the period of Tory reforms. One important example was that while schools in the rest of the United Kingdom had assessment systems imposed from

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London, in Scotland a combination of parental and teacher pressure led to a less rigid system over which teachers retained more control. The chapter includes also an interesting discussion of Gaelic-speaking schools.

Continuing this theme laying out the key features of the system, two chapters on secondary education are provided: Brian Boyd deals with the statutory years, that is ages 12 to 16 years, while David Raffe completes this part of the picture by looking at upper secondary education. Boyd highlights the popularity of Scotland's comprehensive school system (although in the final chapter Munn wonders just how secure this system is), while recognising that here too there has been pressure for special efforts to tackle underachievement, especially among working-class boys. Again some of the distinctively Scottish aspects of the system are discussed: schools are funded on a 'real' basis, not a per pupil basis as is the case elsewhere, the General Teaching Council and fixed maximum class sizes exist, and the Inspectorate has not followed the OFSTED path of school inspection taken in England and Wales.

David Raffe's chapter concentrates on 'Higher Still', a major reform which aims to produce a unified system of upper secondary by 1999. Despite the relatively good standing of schools and teachers among the Scottish public, Raffe suggests that Higher Still represented a recognition that reform and school improvement was needed. Interestingly, part of the basis for Higher Still was a recognition that comparing Scotland to England may have induced a degree of complacency. When set against European examples, Raffe suggests, the state of Scottish education did not look so healthy; in recent years almost exactly the same discussion has taken place in Northern Ireland. Raffe highlights the particular approach taken in Scotland. In some European countries, such as Germany, academic and vocational courses are taken through separate tracks. Most European countries, including England and Wales, maintain separate tracks but are trying to strengthen links between them, such as an overarching qualifications framework. In Scotland, by contrast, Higher Still involves a unified system where pupils take a mixture of academic and vocational courses, albeit in varying proportions. The implication is that schools can help to provide a basis for coherence across the courses. In the final chapter Munn suggests that this distinct approach could provide the basis for a radical transformation of access to and participation in higher education, although this will depend on the view taken by the higher education institutions towards the new qualifications.

Harrison provides an example of the pragmatic Scot with the view that many academic degrees are, simultaneously, vocational degrees: there is, in other words, no dichotomy between the two.

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If this first set of chapters looks at aspects of education structure, there follows a series of chapters which focus on more general features across the system. Alison Cross discusses special education needs. Margaret Clark discusses the rationale and purpose of the General Teacher Council, potentially an interesting harbinger of things to come elsewhere in the UK. One consequence of the GTC is to keep a little more distance between government and the curriculum of teacher education. In this respect Cameron Harrison's chapter on the 'Scottishness' of the Scottish curriculum is particularly interesting, but perhaps might have been even more so if he had offered more answers to some of the questions he poses. Pamela Munn includes a chapter on standards and quality, with particular mention of the Scottish school ethos network, a body of work that has been keenly followed elsewhere, before going on to discuss devolved management in schools, yet another example of a different reform route from that taken in England and Wales.

As indicated above, this theme of the extent of Scottish distinctiveness runs through the book. Perhaps most notable is the well-known situation where the reform agenda in education was applied somewhat more gingerly and with less dramatic effect in Scotland. Clearly an important reason for Tory caution north of the border was the simple fact of their limited electoral support. But Lindsay Paterson's fascinating chapter suggests that there was more to the issue than simply the balance of electoral considerations. Paterson's chapter, on policy-making in education in Scotland, argues that the approach is governed by a principle of 'negotiated autonomy'.

Historical distinctiveness is important in this explanation, but does not in itself explain current practice: historical distinctiveness, he suggests, has been used to justify autonomy in the present. In part this happens because of a tradition of pragmatic rationalism, that is, a concern to get things done rather than a burning desire to get them done in some specific way. This is why, Paterson suggests, that while the 'national' project in Scotland encouraged autonomy, Scots placed rational goals above affective ones. Thus, while 'national' interest provides the basis for a coalition of Scottish interest, this does not take on an exclusivist, dogmatic agenda because of the mitigating role of pragmatism. Ironically, this more benign version of nationalism probably makes the construction of a national coalition, and hence the achievement of autonomous goals, more straightforward. This does have a practical impact on the way policy originating in London is eventually implemented in Scotland: the two examples Paterson uses to illustrate the impact of Scottish filtration are the Technical and Vocational Education

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Initiative, and the already mentioned one of national testing in primary schools.

More prosaically, Paterson also recognises that the Scottish Education Department could not impose policy willy-nilly, but rather had to negotiate with the teachers, who maintained a stronger position than their colleagues in England because of the operation of one main Trade Union and the GTC, and with local authorities, which owned most of the schools and which retained more influence for longer than LEAs in England and Wales.

Although Paterson was writing before the referendum result was known, he does discuss one likely scenario to arise from this new situation. Building on his notion of a benign nationalism in Scotland, he suggests that the policy process will become more transparent, with a continuing interest in negotiation rather than central diktat, and a concern to link individual identities with political process. If accurate, this would indeed provide a version of nationalism which is arguably more attractive in comparison with the more fundamental and exclusive varieties so evident on either end of the continent from Northern Ireland to the former Yugoslavia. But perhaps the benign outcome is not the only possible one. The lessons of Czechoslovakia, where 'velvet revolution' was followed by 'velvet partition', or even of Belgium, perhaps should give cause for concern: in both cases two communities, territorially defined, drifted further and further apart as they pursued autonomous interests. The Czech and Slovak Republics are now, of course, separate states, although it remains questionable whether this is what the majority in either territory ever wanted. Belgium does not have this degree of separation, but the two main parts of the country operate largely without reference to the other, and the level of distinctiveness is such that reintegration would probably not be possible, even if it was desired. Of course, both circumstances have been achieved largely without violence, which is good. But, in relation to Scotland, it perhaps serves to remind us that nationalism, however benign in the present, can be amenable to rapid transformation. In the pursuit of autonomy Scotland could, in other words, easily drift away from the rest of the United Kingdom so far that rowing back becomes difficult.

In this respect, should it be a matter of concern that the book is surprisingly silent on denominational schools and the legacy of Protestant/Catholic divisions - save for Harrison's allusion to the historical legacy of religious differences in the development of Scotland - and seems to say little or nothing on multicultural education? This may be the paranoia of someone who has spent years watching the disastrous and bloody conflict over national and religious differences in Northern Ireland, but the unfortunate

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reality is that communal politics do have an unfortunate track record of building their own momentum. This book will be of interest to anyone who is interested in education or in the changes currently underway in the United Kingdom, but the story is only just beginning.

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