

REVIEW: THE BOGUS STATE OF BRIGADOON

Gerry Hassan

Bill Jamieson, **The Bogus State of Brigadoon: What can save Scotland?**,
London: Centre for Policy Studies 1998, pb, £7.50, ISBN 1 897969775,
pp ii + 48.

'Scotland is facing a prolonged period of self-destructive, inward-looking politics, and a level of instability unknown for more than 200 years.'

Any publication that proudly declares such a sure, defiant statement from the back of its cover is not trying to win any converts by the subtle art of persuasion. Bill Jamieson's Centre for Policy Studies pamphlet tries desperately hard from its title onwards to shock, cajole and confront what he sees as the cosy Scottish consensus of more government, but even he cannot keep up the pace he himself sets.

Jamieson, economics editor of the **Sunday Telegraph**, sees devolution as having failed to slay the SNP separatist dragon so far - something that was always a dubious Labour claim. He gloomily predicts that an SNP-run parliament will engage in 'a war of constitutional attrition' (p.i) where Scotland will 'risk being caught in an internecine cross-fire between a Westminster government' and 'a re-energised nationalist drive for "full" independence' (p.1). This crisis will be 'a moment of truth for Scotland' (p.3), 'a moment of truth for the UK' (p.36) and involve the 'ultimate moment of truth' (p.7): the prospect of Scottish independence.

Jamieson's perspective is obviously ill at ease with the emerging politics of Scotland and the UK. He talks of the 'multi-dimensional battle of warring competencies' (p.1) and 'exploding, multi-dimensional geometry of competing jurisdictions' (p.20) of the Scottish and UK parliaments and the

*Gerry Hassan is Director of the Centre for Scottish Public Policy, 20 Forth Street, Edinburgh EH1 3LH. He is editor of **A Guide to the Scottish Parliament**, published by the Centre for Scottish Public Policy and the Stationery Office.*

Scottish Affairs

EU; so much so that when he declares that 'devolution has unleashed a new mood of confidence in Scotland' (p.4) and sees a new UK constitution arising with 'a new "variable geometry"' (p.38) you find it hard to believe him. He seems profoundly uneasy with the politics of conflict and tension, fluidity and ambiguity, and can only see horrors in multi-layered territorial governance and politics.

The politics of Scottish independence are subjected to analysis and caricature: 'It is not clear whether the sovereignty envisaged for Scotland is of an authentic "clean" type' (p.28), whatever a 'clean' type of sovereignty is in today's world. The SNP's vision 'is a pretender's independence, a hologram sovereignty, a breakaway state as bogus as Brigadoon' (p.4). 'Separatism is not at all the same as sovereignty' (p.35), he later argues, and one can be in little doubt, although it is left unstated, that the proper kind of sovereignty invoked is Westminster, rather than the pseudo-interdependent kind.

In a section called 'The Learned Behaviour of "Dependence"', Jamieson addresses why Scotland became such an unapologetic 'subsidy junkie'. His answer is that Scottish special pleading for more Treasury funds and concessions became 'learned behaviour' (p.10). We are then subjected to a Thatcherite perspective on post-war Scottish politics where from 1945 onwards the 'mystical belief in the regenerative powers of government' (p.12) and of nationalisation and corporatism was established. This became an 'addiction to politicised economics' (p.12) and a 'cocktail of fraud, misallocation and waste' (p.14).

The dismantling of this culture of government spending and intervention in the 1980s produced a political reaction 'not dissimilar to the early phases of drug withdrawal: discomfort followed by resentment, anger and denial' (p.14). Carried away with the scale of his Thatcherite revisionism, he then claims that this dismantling 'paved the way for Labour's second conversion to devolution in the 1990s' (p.15). Perhaps Jamieson has spotted some unique developments the rest of us missed, but the established chronology of political events was that the Scots voted for devolution in 1979, Thatcher came in, and Scottish Labour reconfirmed its commitment to, first, an assembly, then, a parliament, after which the phenomenon of new Labour came about and then the swift, successful passing of the devolution legislation.

Europe, we should not be surprised to learn, emerges in this account as a major bogey figure, attempting to undermine the sovereignty and integrity of the UK and stooping at anything to aid this process such as enlisting the

Review: The Bogus State of Brigadoon

gullible Scottish Nationalists to this cause. The EU's rising influence 'has weakened the pull of British identity as a unifying force in Scotland' (p.18). The intervention of the Scottish executive and parliament in those areas of EU business which affect devolved areas allows, in Jamieson's view, the potential to advance the Maastricht agenda of a Europe of the Regions. This could result in endless debate over what is and is not a 'European matter' from which Jamieson draws a Euro-sceptic lesson: 'if it is a back door entry for more EU influence in UK matters, it is also a back door for the SNP into matters deemed by the Scotland Bill to be reserved' (p.26).

This leaves us with England. The West Lothian Question 'tips the constitutional balance to a degree that may prove intolerable to English voters' (p.24). Any further change in Scottish government has to be a matter for the UK: 'the question of further devolution towards separatism is a matter for the UK overall' (p.24). He does not say what implications this has: whether any further referendums should be at a UK, rather than Scottish level, or if Scotland should be denied the right to self-determination.

Jamieson's concerns become more transparent when he writes that the UK's world position is in peril and, with it, membership of the G7, UN Security Council, World Bank, IMF, etc. 'Without Scotland, the residual UK would lose on the world stage', he writes with a sudden sense of realisation: 'that is why current English indifference to the Scottish question is profoundly corrosive to the interests of the union' (p.38).

He seems oblivious to the fact that the obsession with issues like the West Lothian Question and the Barnett formula by a segment of the English political classes makes Scottish independence, which they supposedly wish to avoid, more rather than less likely. Jamieson does recognise, what many such commentators shy away from, that England itself would lose from the process of Scottish independence in a way similar to the experience of Russia at the breakup of the Soviet Union: where a large number of Russians felt diminished and less, not more, independent by the end of the multi-national Soviet Union.

In closing, Jamieson offers some suggestions for an alternative to the 'government is good' philosophy prevalent in Scotland. These involve abolishing higher rate income tax, inheritance tax, Capital Gains Tax, and taxes and rates on universities, and limiting democracy by an upper house for the Scottish parliament with at least one-third of its members drawn from the business community (most of which would be possible only in a right-wing version of independence). The Irish 'Celtic Tiger' so beloved by the SNP

Scottish Affairs

must be rejected, in favour of the Estonia/Chile/Switzerland model of low taxes and high inward investment, which is surely rather similar, but in two of the three cases, involves a fair degree of political authoritarianism.

The Bogus State of Brigadoon is a wasted opportunity, looking backwards, rather than forwards, drawing its style and analysis from the 1980s Thatcherite hectoring of Scottish middling opinion, and as such is drawn from the intransigent, 'no surrender' Unionism of the period, rather than making a contribution to any new unionism, or drawing from the rich variety of past unionisms. Scotland needs new insights from its unionist traditions and from the centre-right (not necessarily the same), challenging the orthodoxies of Scottish political and public life, but sadly this isn't one of them.

October 1998