

## **SOCIAL INCLUSION AND THE SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT**

*Lindsay Paterson*

### **INTRODUCTION**

There would be many ways of responding to the collection of papers from this symposium. Tying a response to the question of what the Scottish parliament could do does, however, focus the mind: it raises questions about the role of democracy, of national identity, and of partial sovereignty in resolving deep issue of belonging.

It also raises some very general issues indeed. Most notably, it forces us to ask about the relevance of politics. A new democratic institution is all about politics, and so reminds us what politics has achieved. The welfare state started as a deliberate political project. Its achievements are political, and its problems are political. That needs saying in the face of claims that there could ever be any type of apolitical solution to the problem of social exclusion – the apolitics of the market, or the apolitics of technocratic experts governing in secret, or the apolitics of bland consensus. Exclusion is the result of an exercise of power (usually by the excluders, but sometimes by the voluntarily excluded). So dealing with it is bound to involve struggles over power.

The papers also remind us repeatedly of the importance of political mobilisation. Poverty can still inspire anger, a notable example of the political effects of which in recent years was the rebellion against the poll tax. But the papers illustrate many further examples of successful mobilisation. This goes under a variety of different names. The women's movement calls it 'consciousness raising'. Nationalists call it 'nation building' – and Scotland is now going through a period of that in the interests of

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making coherent and modern its partial self-exclusion from the UK polity. And – recurrently – there are the political processes of class formation. Over and over again there are instances of social groups moving from being merely in themselves to being for themselves (to use Marxist language). Although the language of class is only intermittently present in any explicit way in current debates, it haunts them, looking for a political opportunity to thrust itself centre stage. Class may be inadequate as a category of social scientific description, but it remains potent as an inspiration for political action. I return to this at the end.

The final general point about politics takes us directly into debates about the Scottish parliament. Debating how policy is made has always been a crucial part of debate about social exclusion. Part of the problem is the exclusion of certain social groups from equal access to power. So feminists have always argued that dealing with the social or economic disadvantages faced by women requires more women in power. So, too, do campaigners for the rights of people with disabilities or people from minority ethnic groups. And class politics (as distinct from philanthropy) has always been in fact at least as much about power as about poverty. The point, in other words, is that debating constitutional matters – who whom, in Lenin's formulation – is not an abstraction, but is the stuff of real politics about real exclusions.

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What can we say about the role of the Scottish parliament in all this? There are three broad views: that it will have almost no capacity to deal with exclusion, that it will have some significant relevant powers, and that it is much too powerful for the health of Scottish politics.

#### ***The parliament may be irrelevant***

The obvious reason to believe that the parliament will have no effect on exclusion is that many of the relevant powers are reserved to Westminster in the Scotland Act. The parliament can have almost no influence over the system of taxes and benefits, and so is unable to engage in large-scale redistribution. Indeed, its limited power to vary the basic rate of income tax could affect wealth distribution only slightly, and in a bizarre way: an increase in tax would redistribute wealth slightly from those on middle incomes to both the poor (because they don't pay income tax at all) and the rich (because they are above the threshold for paying the UK-wide higher rate).

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The parliament is also almost powerless to deal with unemployment, social security, low incomes or the economic difficulties facing lone parents. Therefore it also has little economic capacity to address child poverty. It has no power over pensions, except those of most Scottish public-sector workers. And it does not even have the competence to change the basis of equalities legislation (as overseen by the Commission for Racial Equality, the Equal Opportunities Commission, or the Disability Rights Commission). It can, of course, lobby on all these things – lobby Westminster as well as a variety of private-sector organisations. That was the rationale of the Scottish Executive's policy paper on social inclusion last year (Scottish Executive 1999). But lobbying is a fairly weak power, even when the same political party is in charge in both parliaments: in particular, it restricts the Scottish government's capacity to act independently. More generally, because the parliament has almost no role in relation to broadcasting, it can at most cajole the media as a way of integrating culturally excluded groups into society.

#### ***The parliament is relevant in specific ways***

However, that most pessimistic assessment of the role of the parliament is only one interpretation. There are three good reasons to believe that matters are not quite so straightforward – because of the legislative competence which the parliament does have, because of its capacity to promote social cohesion, and because of its role in articulating a sense of common identity.

In the first place are its extensive powers in relation to what economists call the supply side. It can do virtually what it wants in education, and is likely to get away with it unchallenged precisely because Scottish education has been symbolically independent throughout the period of the Union. It also inherits an education system with quite a strong legacy of dealing with social exclusion. Comprehensive secondary schools have reduced social-class inequalities in progress and attainment, and have helped to bring about large relative changes in the position of female students (Croxford 1994; Gamoran, 1995; McPherson and Willms 1987; Paterson 1997a). These schools also seem to have had an impact on the attainment of students from minority ethnic groups, who now progress to university at a much higher rate than their white peers (Raab 1998).

The relative success (and relative popularity (Paterson 1997a)) of comprehensive secondary schools is the best-known relevant legacy for the parliament. But Scottish education also has other experiences of successfully overcoming aspects of exclusion. The integration of Catholic schools into the public system after 1918 has helped to end the previously extreme exclusion

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of Catholics (Willms 1992). This process then was further advanced by comprehensive secondary schools to such an extent that, by the mid-1990s, Catholics who had gone through the comprehensive school system had the same chances of social mobility as non-Catholics (Paterson 2000).

More recently, schemes to encourage reading in the first few years of primary school have been developed by several Scottish Education Authorities (Fraser 1997), and seem to have had a significant impact on social class inequalities (although rigorous evaluation will not be available for another couple of years). This may be because social class inequalities in attainment are much less severe up to about age 4 than subsequently, and so that early primary is the most effective stage at which to try to prevent wide inequalities from emerging.

At the other end of initial education, Scottish further education colleges have captured a much larger share of higher education than their counterparts in the rest of the UK (Paterson 1997b). Because FE colleges are also better than universities at attracting working-class students, they are an important egalitarian route to higher education (Gallacher et al 1997). The Cubie committee's recommendations on reforming student finance recognise the importance of further education in promoting social inclusion, and argue that the state should encourage and subsidise that route (Independent Committee of Inquiry into Student Finance 1999). That committee also proposed ingenious devices of getting around the limited taxation powers of the parliament. Means-tested charging of fees is one way. Putting the money gathered into a fund that would be distributed to subsidise the educational costs of people living in poverty is another. Having almost no macro-economic powers need not prevent significant redistribution. Implementing something like Cubie's recommendations would be a much more effective act of redistribution than any amount of lobbying by the Scottish Executive of Gordon Brown.

Education is the most obvious area in which the parliament could have an impact on exclusion. But it also can do a lot in training: for example, throughout its legislative responsibility for most of training policy, it could shape the New Deal in Scotland even though employment legislation is reserved to Westminster (Fairley 1998). It could promote health policies that would mitigate social and other inequalities. It could reform land ownership to promote access to various kinds of activity, not only leisure: for example, it could encourage a more democratic planning system. And the parliament is able to promote equality within its own legislative areas, even though the overall framework of equality legislation is reserved.

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More generally than on these specific legislative possibilities, the parliament is likely to want, and be able, to promote social cohesion, an agent for Adam Smith's moral sentiments. The explicit intention of the reformers who have established the parliament is that it should renew Scottish pluralism. The high proportion (37%) of women among the 129 members is one signal of that. So also is the report of the Consultative Steering Group on the parliament's working procedures. The key points in opening up the policy process to wider influence are that the committees of the parliament have the power to initiate as well as scrutinise legislation, that control of parliamentary business is by a cross-party committee not the whips (in which no party has a commanding majority), that Bills are published in draft form and with a full explanatory memorandum for wide consultation, that the parliament has a mechanism for hearing public petitions, and that there is a parliamentary information and educational service. The Executive has also recently awarded a large grant to establish a Civic Forum (as in Northern Ireland) to focus the views of organisations in civil society.

If this renovation of the policy process works, then it is likely to strengthen social capital in the ways which Robert Putnam found happening in Italy (Putnam 1993). The parliament has a rich legacy here, because Scottish civic institutions can command wide trust, partly because they have embodied Scottish identity for so long, and more immediately because they seemed to protect Scotland from Thatcherism. That trust probably extends to elected local government, who had quite a good record of promoting social inclusion in the 1980s, and whose autonomous efforts will be an important part of any overall strategy developed by the parliament. The parliament could restore some of local government's capacity to redistribute by, for example, reforming the system of local taxation (but it has to be said that the Scottish government's social inclusion strategy pays scant attention to the role of local government (Scottish Executive 1999)).

The parliament may also want to promote civic activism to tap into the abiding middle-class predilection for philanthropy. The parliament could promote a sense of equal rights simply by its style and rhetoric, even in areas where it has little legislative competence.

This point about debate and symbolism brings us to the third possible effect of the parliament. It can become a forum for redefining Scottish identities even though still part of the UK. Despite the often ill-informed comments on the whole process of Scottish home rule by some commentators in the London media, the parliament is more likely to promote a non-antagonistic version of Scottishness than the unreformed Union has been able to do in the

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last half century. That is not only because a clear majority of members of the parliament (including most of the SNP) will want to use the new responsibilities as a reason to stop blaming the English for Scotland's ills. It is also because a less antagonistic style of internal Scottish politics is likely to encourage a less adversarial attitude to Westminster. For example, if Labour and the SNP are talking to each other in the committees in Holyrood, then there is less reason for the SNP to be virulent in its attitude to a Labour government in London.

Part of this will then be about the kind of community which Scotland imagines itself to be. Even though the SNP did not win the election, their raising the possibility of increasing taxes to pay for better public services did have the significant effect of forcing a debate about moral responsibility and the public good. Having once stimulated that, it will not go away. Indeed, dissident Labour members are as likely to raise the question of paying for public services as the SNP (and the predilection for redistributive measures shown by the Cubie committee suggests that similar ideas may well come from civil society). This kind of debate about identity may not have much impact immediately on policy. But – if Anthony Duff is correct in his paper – it could shape the context for policy over many decades.

#### ***The parliament may be too powerful***

The final view of the advent of the parliament is that it may be simply too enthusiastic about national homogeneity to promote inclusion. This may seem paradoxical, but the point is that too unified a polity or identity may be too impervious to allow people entry who have partial allegiances elsewhere. If integration is only on the terms of the majority, then it is not integration so much as absorption.

One familiar reason for that could be a certain style of nationalism, but I don't think this is the main problem in Scotland where political nationalism is intimately tied to civic institutions operating with a thorough and long-standing commitment to liberalism. The problem is, rather, in the moral authoritarianism of a certain idea of community. Scottish views of community are similar to the communitarianism of Etzioni. Indeed civic republicanism has been a strong strand in Scottish political thought since the Scottish moralists of the eighteenth century – notably Hume, Smith and Ferguson, but also the more practically relevant ideas of lesser Enlightenment thinkers such as William Robertson, Thomas Reid, Dugald Stewart and William Hamilton. During most of the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, this idea was manifest in the moral authority of the presbyterian

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parish. The practical effect since the middle of the twentieth century has been a quite uncritical faith in the state – not the UK state straightforwardly, but the Scottish quasi-state as embodied in and around the Scottish Office. The parliament may simply reinforce these tendencies by giving that state greater legitimacy, coherence and power.

This is not just an abstract proposition about sovereignty and allegiance. It could have quite important effects on the whole direction of Scottish politics over the next few decades. Can Scotland really evolve an understanding of identity that not only tolerates diversity but actively promotes it? If it can't, then not only will it fail to integrate minorities of various sorts. It is also likely to exclude itself from any kind of real participation in Britain or the UK, whether or not Scotland becomes formally independent.

To illustrate the dilemmas in practice, consider one area of policy that is relevant to exclusion and inclusion – equal opportunities - in the light of the four norms of community which Anthony Duff outlines in his paper. This example illustrates the importance of acknowledging the partial nature of Scotland's incipient self-exclusion from the Britain. The Scottish parliament – for all its claims – is not the only influence on Scottish identity and society.

The political norm raises obvious difficulties because Scotland is now only partly self-governing. Women make up a much larger proportion of the Holyrood parliament than they do of Westminster. This has been presented as a significant inclusive achievement of Scottish politics, and it undoubtedly is that. But to pretend that the nearly gender-balanced Scottish parliament is the only reality and that the male-dominated Westminster is false is to ignore the continuing legitimacy of both institutions. So long as Scottish voters want to retain links to the rest of the UK, and so long as Westminster contains far fewer women members than Holyrood, both exclusion and inclusion by gender remain part of Scottish identity. In any case, the complete absence of members of any minority ethnic groups from the Scottish Parliament stands as a perpetual reminder of the only partial inclusiveness of that institution.

I discussed the material norm earlier. The parliament can promote inclusion through education but not through social security. That is a permanent reality so long as voters want any kind of UK link. Again, it is specious to argue that, because voters have favoured inclusive policies through Holyrood elections, the invidious effects of UK policies don't count even in a normative sense. Of course they do – very practically for many thousands of people living in Scotland, but also normatively because Scots henceforth are living in a polity with two legitimate sources of norms.

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Scotland also continues to inhabit Britain so far as cultural norms are concerned. That means, most evidently, that the more right-of-centre preferences of southern England continue to be part of Scottish culture, again insofar as Scotland chooses to remain in Britain. But the situation is made all the more complex by the inheritance from Britain of a firm belief in public welfare as a means to promote equality, at least as strong as anywhere in Europe according to recent analysis of the British Social Attitudes Survey by Peter Taylor-Gooby (1998). This is probably one of the reasons why Scots do remain attached to Britain – a sense that many supposedly Scottish values are in fact British.

On language – Duff's fourth type of community – there is no linguistic ambivalence of the kind found elsewhere in Europe. But there is again the question of a different style of politics. If Scottish politicians evolve a language of politics that is less confrontational than in Westminster – if only because so many of the members of the Scottish parliament are women - then Scottish politics will be in two linguistic worlds at the same time. And, once more, so long as Scots remain attached to the UK, there would be no basis for claiming that the inclusive language is the more real.

The point of these examples is to illustrate the complexity of the identities which Scottish politics is now acquiring, and therefore to point to the falsity of any claim by the parliament that Scotland is homogeneous. The duality of Scottish and British is a long-standing (and long-noted) feature of Scotland: Britain and British values are not external to Scotland, but infuse it. The duality can symbolise a much wider acceptance of multiple identities, and therefore of inclusion on terms not dictated by the majority. But, in its new assertiveness, the new parliament and the new self-confidence of Scottish culture could inadvertently neglect the continuing need for multiplicity.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

Given the indisputable limitations on the parliament's powers in relation to social inclusion, the first point to note is that there has to be a debate about acquiring extra powers. That is not something to be avoided on the spurious grounds that the parliament ought not to talk about further constitutional change. It certainly should, for the very reason that discussing the constitution is part of discussing where power lies, and therefore is one important part of developing strategies for including more people in the exercise of power and of exercising that power responsibly and effectively.

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The parliament is likely, by its very existence, to be an inspiration for political mobilisation, encouraging many of the groups who are addressed by the papers presented here to engage in political action. We are about to rediscover the mobilising potential of having a parliament on our doorstep – the opportunity to 'peeble them wi stanes' which was Walter Scott's way (in *Heart of Midlothian*) of summing up the pre-Union form of protest. Not everything can be done by consensus, although we might be able to continue to respect and debate with each other even while vociferously disagreeing.

This mobilisation is likely, furthermore, to be conducted mainly in the language of class politics. That has never gone away in Scotland. It is explicitly in the rhetoric of the Scottish Socialist Party, and it is implicit in much of the language of the SNP and the Scottish Labour left. As David Dennison pointed out at the symposium from which these papers come, Scottish Labour will have to shift leftwards over time if it is not to lose Scotland (both for the party and perhaps for the Union).

Of course, this class politics will be modified by the experience of the new social movements, and may be called community politics to signal that. But ultimately rights have to be universalised within the political community if they are to be rights at all. Each political community has its own universal principles – liberalism, communism, nationalism. It is likely that the form which that universalisation takes in Scotland will be a return to class expressed as a type of inclusive Scottish community. Whether that then succeeds in overcoming exclusion will be a matter of political struggle. But its chances, over several decades, are high: the most potent political movements for social reform throughout the twentieth century have been formed when the politics of nation and the politics of class are brought to bear on the same social purpose.

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