

THE ATLANTIC NORTH WEST: THE HIGHLANDS AND ISLANDS AS A TWENTY- FIRST-CENTURY SUCCESS STORY

James Hunter

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Imagine Inverness and the wider Highlands and Islands in 2050. Imagine that the town and its surrounding area are, by this point, every bit as successful – economically and otherwise – as any part of Britain. Far-fetched? Not particularly. Certainly no more far-fetched than it would have been to forecast in 1990 that Inverness, ten years on, might have a football team capable of knocking Celtic out of the Scottish Cup.

An essential starting-point, in this regard, is a region far from Scotland: a region bounded to the south by California, to the north by British Columbia, to the west by the sea and to the east by the Rocky Mountains. Comprising Washington State, Oregon, Idaho and – by some folk's reckoning – Western Montana, this region is known to Americans as the Pacific North West. Its climate, like that of the Highlands and Islands, is mostly benign. Its scenery, like that of the Highlands and Islands, is outstanding. And had I been writing 50, 40, even 30 years ago, I might have gone on to describe the Pacific North West's population as being, like that of the Highlands and Islands, comparatively small. I might also have gone on to classify the Pacific North West economy as one which was, like that of the Highlands and Islands, relatively undeveloped.

During recent decades, however, Pacific North West population has soared – while the region's economic prospects have changed hugely for the better.

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Something of the nature of this transformation is evident from the achievements of the greater Seattle area, the Pacific North West's foremost urban district and a locality whose population has grown by more than 60 per cent since 1970.

In the mid-nineteenth century, when the several thousand inhabitants of the then 700-year old town of Inverness were celebrating their acquisition of rail links to the south, Seattle did not exist. And even 20 or 30 years later, when Seattle was taking shape as a logging settlement and harbour on the eastern shore of Puget Sound, Inverness was – by any measure one cares to apply – the more significant centre of the two.

That, of course, has long ceased to be the case. Economically and demographically, Seattle outpaced Inverness before the nineteenth century's end. By the middle decades of the twentieth century, with the Seattle-based Boeing Aircraft Corporation's workforce rising from 4,000 in 1939 to 44,000 in 1944, Seattle – still less than 100 years old at this stage – had left Inverness far behind. And during the last 20 or 30 years, largely as a result of the Pacific North West's runaway success in selling itself as an almost ideal place in which to live and in which to do business, the disparities between Inverness on the one hand, and Seattle on the other, have become so enormous as to make it seem little short of nonsensical to compare, or even to contrast, the two.

But this, the risks of such a venture notwithstanding, is exactly what this article sets out to do. Hence my title, *The Atlantic North West*. This title's contention is plain. In the course of the century just starting, the Highlands and Islands – this region of which Inverness is capital – should try, or so this article argues, to make itself the equivalent, in a United Kingdom or Western European context, of what the Pacific North West has become in relation to the country, and the continent, of which it's part. What I'm advocating, in other words, is turning Inverness into a Scottish, British or European approximation to Seattle – with the wider Highlands and Islands taking on the role of Seattle's equally buoyant Pacific North West hinterland.

Summarised thus, I know, my suggested exercise looks next best thing to impossible. The greater Seattle economy alone is larger than the Highlands and Islands economy – never mind the Inverness one – by a substantial multiple. And Seattle's economy is also one of tremendously high quality. That economy contains, for instance, Microsoft – by far the biggest computer software company in the world and a company possessing, moreover, one of the most internationally pervasive products our planet has ever seen. But the greater Seattle economy also contains (and this is what gives that economy its

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continuing growth potential) more than 2,200 other software firms – to say nothing of a further several thousand new and expanding enterprises in highly innovative fields like electronics, biotechnology, medical equipment and environmental engineering.

We are, I acknowledge, a long – a very long – way short of having a Seattle-style economy in Inverness and in the rest of the Highlands and Islands. But what we do have here are the foundations, the underpinning attributes, on which a Seattle-style economy might conceivably be constructed. I'll come back to those attributes in a moment. But having provided a glimpse of where this article's heading, I want, at this point, to renounce all claim to prophecy. The study of history – in which, from time to time, I have engaged – has taught me, if it's taught me nothing else, to distrust futurology. So complex is human society, so rapid is the pace of change, so numerous are the imponderables we confront, that predictions reaching more than a few months ahead are almost bound to be erroneous. The record proves as much. Neither I nor anyone else, therefore, can predict what's going to happen in the Highlands and Islands as this new century unfolds. What I can do is offer some thoughts as to what we could be doing, now and in the immediate future, if we want, as I suggest we should, to engineer the emergence of the economic, social and other circumstances that would enable us to set the Highlands and Islands on the road to becoming what I've called the Atlantic North West.

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To propose that we make an Atlantic North West of the Highlands and Islands is to confront, in a very fundamental fashion, what Tony Blair has called the forces of conservatism. Those forces are nowhere more evident than in our unwillingness to picture a Scotland organised in such a way as to equip our country with commercial and industrial centres sufficiently dynamic to challenge the economic dominance exercised, for 200 years now, by the Central Belt. Postulate a mid-twenty-first-century Scotland in which the Highlands and Islands are as significant economically as Lanarkshire or the Lothians and you are likely to be treated, especially in Edinburgh, with the mildly indulgent condescension which metropolitans always reserve for provincials with big ideas. But why? Other nations have long been accustomed to the notion that yesterday's problem region might be tomorrow's economic generator. What makes that notion so unimaginable here?

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Consider, in this context, the country with which I began: the United States. A vital contributor to keeping the U.S. at the forefront internationally, for much of the last century, has been the frequency with which Americans have revolutionised their economic geography. Over and over again, localities which were previously on the margins, on their uppers, or both, have been transformed into growth centres: California in the decades following the Second World War; the South in the 1970s; and most recently, of course, the Pacific North West.

What's long been true of the U.S. may just beginning to be true of the European Union also – witness the way in which the formerly moribund economies of Spain and Ireland are presently expanding at a quite unprecedented rate.

Within the more limited confines of Scotland, however, we remain extraordinarily reluctant to envisage the possibility that the pattern of overall economic activity might be other than the one to which we've been, for ages now, accustomed. The Scotland that took shape in the course of the industrial revolution – a Scotland in which a booming and densely urbanised Central Belt became flanked, to the south and to the north, by depopulating rural hinterlands – is so embedded in our national consciousness that most of us take for granted that no other dispensation is conceivable. Policy has long been shaped accordingly. When nemesis overtook the enterprises – coal, steel, shipbuilding and the rest – on which Central Belt prosperity was originally founded, no thought was given, as would have happened automatically in America, to the option of fostering new activities in new settings. Instead it was assumed, as it's mostly still assumed, that – despite there being no very logical reason, in the age of the internet, for sticking with a population distribution dictated largely by the resource requirements of Victorian heavy industry – business must forever remain concentrated in the places where it has customarily been located.

But from a Highlands and Islands standpoint, at any rate, it's time to challenge this assumption: by insisting that the Highlands and Islands are every bit as well equipped, in some respects better equipped, than any other part of Scotland to capitalise on the opportunities opening up in consequence of the changed nature of the Scottish, British, European, indeed global, economy.

Of interest in this regard is the thinking of one of Tony Blair's favourite gurus, Charles Leadbeater. In a recent book, **Living on Thin Air**, Leadbeater wrote:

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We are all in the thin-air business these days. It is slightly frightening to work out just how little supports most of our livelihoods. In the past, people made their living by extracting ore, mining coal, making steel, manufacturing cars, bringing cattle to market ... Work was hard physical labour ... The output of this labour could be weighed on scales, shipped in railway cars, measured with rules, stockpiled. These days most people in most advanced economies produce nothing that can be weighed: communications, software, advertising, financial services. They trade, write, design, talk, spin and create; rarely do they make anything. The ... real assets of the modern economy come out of our heads, not out of the ground: ideas, knowledge, skills, talent and creativity.

From a Highlands and Islands perspective, it's impossible to overestimate the significance of the state of affairs Leadbeater thus describes. When the British economy depended on materials like coal or iron ore; when that economy consisted primarily of mines, shipyards, locomotive works, heavy engineering plants; when workers had to be concentrated in large cities; when ease of physical communication mattered above all other things; when distance was an insuperable barrier: when all of that applied, then the Highlands and Islands were at a massive disadvantage. In the new economy – this economy driven increasingly by information and computer technology, or ICT, this economy in which more and more people are living, as Leadbeater insists, on thin air – many of the disadvantages under which the Highlands and Islands laboured previously have been rendered suddenly irrelevant.

A tiny personal example. This article began with my citing various facts and figures about the Seattle economy. Ten or five years ago, as a writer located in the Highlands and Islands, I would have had to leave my home, then in Skye, and travel to Edinburgh in order to access a reference library that could be guaranteed to have this sort of information readily available. From Skye, the return journey to that library, together with the research time required there, would have occupied a full two days. Now I sit at my desk in my own home, its location immaterial in this context, switch on my personal computer, connect that computer to the internet – and, in no more than a couple of minutes, I have in front of me all that I could ever want to know, and rather more besides, about Seattle and its environs.

What's at stake here is more than a matter of personal convenience. For a time, I made the bulk of my living from freelance journalism. In such journalism, you're paid so much per hundred, or per thousand, words. Were a piece touching on the Seattle economy called for by **The Scotsman** of 1985, say, then – in the world of that time – an Edinburgh-based freelance could

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have this article researched, written and filed before a Skye-based freelance had begun establishing the facts. The Edinburgh-based writer, in other words, could earn in one day a fee that a Skye-based writer would take the best part of three to obtain. The Edinburgh writer's fee, moreover, would be largely free of costs – while the Skye writer's travel costs alone might actually exceed such earnings as his or her article generated. From a purely financial standpoint, therefore, freelance writers who had ambitions to deal with anything other than local topics but who nevertheless located themselves in the Highlands and Islands were not – prior to the internet's emergence – behaving very rationally. Now, however, the competitive disadvantage previously attaching to such freelance writing in the Highlands and Islands has – thanks to the internet and related developments – well nigh disappeared.

Since our twenty-first-century economy is unlikely to consist primarily, or even largely, of freelance writers, this might seem neither here nor there. But what's true of freelance writing is true of lots of other activities as well. The arrival and expansion of the knowledge economy – of humanity's rapidly growing ability to live, in Charles Leadbeater's phrase, on thin air – has had the effect of placing the Highlands and Islands on the same level playing field as those more southerly regions, the Scottish Central Belt included, which those of us resident in the Highlands and Islands used to think so much more favourably located than ourselves.

Three examples – one small in scale, one medium, one large – of the business growth that has already resulted from this fact:

- Gael.net, based in Portree and established in 1995, is a team of five creative and technical specialists offering web site design, e-business and multimedia skills.
- Iomart, formed in 1999, offers a whole range of internet and e-commerce services to business. Although headquartered in Glasgow and with offices in London and San José, the company has strong links with Lewis where Iomart maintains a state-of-the-art net centre – a centre which, though only 12 months old, already employs some 60 people and will be employing 100 by this year's end.
- The Cap Gemini Group is a leading European management consulting and IT services company operating in 20 countries and with 38,000 employees. Of those, several hundred are located in the Highlands – where Cap Gemini now operate four call centres.

All of this has been accomplished in the last eight years. So has much else. If knowledge, information and telecommunications-related activities are

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generously defined, then this sector of the Highlands and Islands economy accounts for a combined workforce of some 13,000. This workforce is collectively involved in electronic publishing, data processing, software development, training, education and a lot more besides. And the existence of this workforce, I contend, is proof that – if only in a relatively minor way so far – our region is beginning to acquire some at least of the attributes I pointed to, at the outset, as characteristic both of Seattle and of the wider Pacific North West. We're acquiring other such attributes as well:

- In the shape of high-tech manufacturing enterprises such as Inverness Medical, turning out diagnostic equipment, or AGM Batteries, a Thurso-based joint venture involving AEA Technology, Japan Storage Company Ltd and Mitsubishi Material Corporation.
- In the shape, as a recent survey demonstrated, of an excellent overseas export record in the manufacturing field – with Highlands and Islands manufactured exports having doubled in five years.
- In the shape of considerable inward investment, some of it involving Inverness Medical and AGM Batteries, which last year secured the Highlands and Islands a record total of 1,275 new jobs in inward investment projects.
- In the shape, thanks in part to inward investment and thanks in part to an indigenous business start-up rate some 25 per cent above the Scottish average, of a generally expanding and diversifying economy that's now employing 40 per cent more people than were in employment in the Highlands and Islands just 30 years ago.
- In the shape, finally, of population growth fuelled by substantial inward migration – with overall Highlands and Islands population up 20 per cent since the mid-1960s and with various localities, such as Skye and the Inverness area, doing a lot better than that.

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Despite the foregoing, the Highlands and Islands are by no means without problems. Current trends in agriculture and in oil-related fabrication, to take two of the more obvious examples of such problems, speak loudly for themselves. Nor is it the case that population is increasing uniformly across our region. It isn't. The Highlands and Islands contain localities – such as Kintyre, some of the Argyll islands, the Western Isles, the north isles of

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Orkney and parts of Sutherland and Caithness – where population is still falling.

But this doesn't make any less striking the regionwide demographic statistics quoted above. To anyone with any sense of Highlands and Islands history – a history long bound up with the fact that, from the 1840s to the 1960s, our population fell without pause – those statistics are as heartening as they are remarkable. During the last 30 years, a period when the population of Scotland as a whole was static or even in decline, total Highlands and Islands population went up by a fifth. The purely fortuitous advent, in the early 1970s, of North Sea oil had something to do with this fact, I admit. But oil's impact is by no means the whole story – something illustrated by the very rapid population growth experienced in places (Skye, for instance) where oil has never been a factor. So, oil apart, what's underpinned the expansion of our population? Our diversification into a whole new area of activity; into this life on thin air which the knowledge economy's starting to make possible: that's contributed. And so has the attribute which, above all others, the Highlands and Islands – this prospective Atlantic North West – shares with Washington State, with Oregon, with Idaho and with Montana: a supremely attractive natural environment.

The environmental significance of the Highlands and Islands can be demonstrated statistically. Take Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) – Britain's leading nature conservation designation. Of the 1,400 or so SSSIs in Scotland, almost half are in the Highlands and Islands. On an acreage basis, moreover, our Highlands and Islands special sites – which are special, incidentally, because of the plants, animals, habitats, rocks and landforms they contain – account for more than 70 per cent of the land so designated in all of Scotland.

In regard to the Highlands and Islands environment, however, figures can take us just so far. What's highlighted by our numerous SSSIs, and by the various EU designations to which much of the Highlands and Islands are also subject, is something that our poets, our writers, indeed our people generally, have known for generations: taken together, our scenery, our wildlife, our woodlands, our seashores, our landscapes make the Highlands and Islands a most appealing place.

Ten or 20 years back, this was widely thought, from a developmental standpoint, to be something of a problem. SSSIs were then commonly condemned and resisted on the grounds that they might inhibit economic expansion. 'Scenery's all very well,' it was said, 'but people can't live on scenery.'

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Today we know they can and do. Thus a 1996 study showed that spending by climbers and mountaineers in the Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE) area then amounted annually to £149 million. This spending was reckoned, in 1996, to sustain about 4,000 jobs. That total will have increased in the interim. And the people holding down the jobs in question are living, in a real sense, on scenery – on those Highlands and Islands landscapes which bring so many climbers, and so many walkers, north.

Walkers and climbers are by no means the only groups attracted here by the sheer quality of our natural surroundings. Those surroundings underpin tourism of every kind. They underpin, in particular, so-called green or ecotourism – birdwatching, dolphinwatching and the like – which is already of great importance to the Highlands and Islands and of which we'll hear much more in the century now commencing.

Nor is our landscape's pulling power confined to visitors. That same landscape, along with the wildlife it sustains and the recreational opportunities it offers, plays a vital role in attracting permanent residents – in making the Highlands and Islands, just like the Pacific North West, the sort of place where more and more folk want to be.

What was once, from the developmental point of view, a Highlands and Islands drawback – our having missed out on heavy industry – has thus, in the longer run, become a key advantage. From a purely ecological perspective, it should possibly be noted, our Highlands and Islands countryside has been seriously degraded – because of deforestation, overgrazing and the like. But since the Highlands and Islands were never industrialised in the way the Central Belt, say, was industrialised, this same countryside is, whether by British or by international standards, in a comparatively natural condition – and, scenically, it is, as it has always been, spectacular. Hence the extent to which the Highlands and Islands can legitimately be said to have cornered a hefty slice of that scarcest and most valuable of present-day resources: a reasonably unspoiled environment.

Our possession of this great asset, this outstanding environment of ours, when set alongside the possibilities opened up by the knowledge economy – by our newfound ability to live on thin air, in other words – gives us the chance to create, here in the Highlands and Islands, conditions conducive to the emergence of a highly successful society: a United Kingdom equivalent, I contend, of the Pacific North West.

However, and here I come to this article's central message, neither the knowledge economy nor the knowledge economy in combination with our natural environment are themselves guaranteed to deliver a society of the sort

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I have in mind. If we are, first, to aspire to the construction of such a society and, second, to begin to take the steps needed to make it a reality, then we've got to ensure that both Inverness and the wider Highlands and Islands possess, in full measure, the highly elusive but absolutely critical quality which Americans call liveability. Seattle and its hinterland, as it happens, are reckoned among the more liveable localities in the United States; in part, because of their booming economy; in part, because of their natural surroundings; but in part, too, because of the manner in which the attractiveness of those natural surroundings has been enhanced and reinforced by human effort: not least in the shape of a built environment of tremendously high quality.

It's with regard to this particular attribute – our built environment – that the Highlands and Islands lag especially far behind the Pacific North West. Our economic prospects, for reasons that I've touched on, are improving. Our scenery is as appealing as ever. And the pace of our cultural life is noticeably quickening – not least as a result of us taking more and more pride in the linguistic, musical and other aspects of our regional heritage. But our area's expanding economy, our area's growing population, our area's increasingly buoyant culture have so far done little for our built environment. I may believe that the Highlands and Islands can become, in the course of the twenty-first century, one of the United Kingdom's most successful regions. But there is precious little in the recent architectural record of Inverness, for instance, to suggest as much. **The Scotsman** columnist Tom Morton's various rechristenings of Inverness – as 'Dolphinludge' or 'Cumbernauld with a kilt' – may have caused offence to Invernessians. But they're hard to quarrel with architecturally. Inverness has expanded enormously in the last 20, 30 years – a period when the town has been one of the fastest growing in all of Britain. But Inverness, for all that, contains few modern buildings which convey – as so many buildings in Seattle, for example, convey – a sense of their being the work of individuals and institutions committed to the notion that the future, whatever exactly it might bring, will be a huge improvement on the past. In other ways, the Highlands and Islands may at last be on the up and up. Architecturally, our region remains dreadfully lacking in self-confidence.

That, I think, would have been a source of some disappointment to the late William Andrew Smith, the man commemorated by the lecture on which this article is based.

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William Smith, who died at the age of 76 in 1975, was an Invernessian who, as Mr Smith's **Inverness Courier** obituary observed, gave 'many years of public service to his native town'. The **Courier** obituary continues:

After retiring in 1961 from business ... Mr Smith was successful in a by-election for Drummond Ward in the following year, and during his 13 years' service with Inverness Town Council he had the distinction of being appointed three times as Provost, and was the last to hold that office before the reorganisation of local government.

As Inverness's provost, the **Courier** obituary makes clear, William Smith was no mere figurehead:

He was steadfast in his support for the Eden Court [Theatre] project, for which he ... had been striving since 1967, and in whose opening next year [1976], he would have taken such pride and pleasure. He maintained, sometimes against strong opposition, that a rapidly developing and important town like Inverness urgently required such a project and he stuck to his guns when the estimated cost began to rise and a public inquiry was held. Eden Court was a development which would be of benefit not only to Inverness but to a large part of the Highlands, he said, and they would one day be proud of it.

About Eden Court Theatre, it seems to me, William Smith was absolutely right. And what Inverness and much of the rest of the Highlands and Islands need today, it further seems to me, is something of his unyielding commitment to the concept of our area as a place deserving of the very best.

Time was in the Highlands and Islands when we were capable of producing innovative architecture of the highest possible order: the brochs of some 2,000 years ago; the medieval castles of the Atlantic seaboard; tremendous churches such as my favourite Highlands and Islands building, Kirkwall's cathedral of St Magnus.

What lay behind our giving up on top-grade architecture? Our gradual loss, I'm personally convinced, of our collective self-esteem. When, in the later middle ages and afterwards, our region became subject – politically, culturally, economically – to extraneous power centres like Edinburgh and London, our people increasingly bought into the notion of their own peripherality, their own inferiority.

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Told insistently and repeatedly that everything about us – starting with our Gaelic and Norse languages – was worthless, second-rate, of no account, we started to believe this of ourselves. Ultimately and tragically, we associated our home area so firmly with failure that we came close to defining individual success in terms of the distance our young people managed to put between themselves and their places of origin. To get on, we thought, was necessarily to get out. So the man or woman whose career was being forged in Edinburgh, Glasgow, London or Los Angeles was, by virtue of that fact alone, accounted a much higher flier than the men or women who, in their mid-twenties, say, chose to remain here in the Highlands and Islands.

You don't get world-beating architecture, it goes almost without saying, in a region that's inhabited by folk who reckon themselves failures.

Nor was this wholly negative perception of the Highlands and Islands merely a matter of us having been encouraged to undervalue, perhaps even despise, our own background, our own heritage. While it's possible to argue – as I've done in my historical writings – that the eventual marginalisation of the Highlands and Islands, far from being inherent in their geography, was the wholly avoidable consequence of the Highlands and Islands policies pursued by successive Scottish and British governments, the more important point, in the context of this lecture, is that our area's marginalisation, irrespective of how we account for its origins, was very definitely a fact: for the whole of the nineteenth century certainly; for much of the twentieth century as well.

Today we've begun at last to transcend the limitations imposed on us by our history. Demographically, economically, culturally, the Highlands and Islands are performing better – in relation to the rest of the UK – than at any point in the last two centuries. But while we know this to be true – as it were – intellectually, our longstanding sense of our region as a place with no prospects is so integral to our outlook, as Highlands and Islands residents, that we find it difficult to regard our success as anything other than precarious and transient. Because it's been so long since the Highlands and Islands could look forward to a good future, we instinctively reject the notion that such a future might finally be on offer.

On Provost William Smith voicing the thought, when Inverness's modern expansion had just started, that this expanding town might legitimately aspire to a first-class theatre, he was, metaphorically speaking, immediately howled down. What would have been taken for granted in Seattle – when that city was at a similar stage of its development – was thought dangerously, almost stupidly, ambitious here. Eden Court, to be sure, was ostensibly decried – in our local media and elsewhere – on grounds of cost. But behind the penny-

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pinching calculations, I suggest, was something far more fundamental: our age-old acceptance of our own subordinate status; a subordinate status, of course, which Eden Court's promoters, Provost Smith prominent among them, sought to challenge.

I'd be surprised if his crusade for Eden Court Theatre did much to boost Mr Smith's overall popularity. To modify a phrase coined by a mid-twentieth-century politician, Aneurin Bevan, we tend, in the Highlands and Islands, to be completely at ease with the poverty of our expectations. We don't take kindly to the thought we could do better. And the dreary consequences of such defeatism are all around us – not least in our architecture.

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From an architectural and town-planning perspective, Inverness is a place of huge potential. If you doubt this, stand for a few moments, next time you're in that vicinity, on the Ness Bridge. In the distance is the bulky shape of Ben Wyvis; snow-covered for much of the year; looming over Inverness, I'm tempted to suggest, in much the same way as Mount Rainier looms, a little more distantly, over Seattle. And where Seattle has its seaways, we have the River Ness – its waters so clear and unpolluted that, from the Ness Bridge, right at the town's centre, you can watch an angler hook, play and land a fresh-run salmon. But what do we make of this tremendous asset, this beautiful river of ours? Not a lot.

For reasons quite beyond imagining, Inverness has made its river almost inaccessible. People want instinctively to get close to the Ness. Of course they do; especially on fine days, it would be strange if they did not. But to approach the river they have, first, to brave, on either bank, fast-moving traffic; next they have to clamber across a set of metal railings; then, at the end of all of this, they have to perch precariously on a bank that, if it was much steeper, would be sheer.

That's the way the Ness is – and has been for decades past. But imagine how it could be if we willed it otherwise; if we set out, the public sector and the private sector in partnership, to take advantage of the quite tremendous opportunities Inverness's possession of its riverside might open up in the century ahead.

Three years ago, in a document entitled **A Vision for Inverness**, Highland Council summarised those opportunities thus:

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With [its] spectacular outlook over the Black Isle to Ben Wyvis, the riverside epitomises Inverness as a town 'set in the Highlands' for most visitors and is an important landscape for residents. Although ... marred by unsympathetic commercial developments dating from the 1960s [and to which I return below], it remains the prime focus towards which tourists inevitably gravitate. Bishop's Walk and the Ness Islands [pedestrianised localities well to the south-west of the town centre] show how the amenity of the wider riverside could be dramatically lifted by narrowing down adjoining roads, by reclaiming space for pedestrians and by the provision of simple seating and other amenities ... The riverside [thus altered] could increasingly be a venue for restaurants, bars, bistros, antiques, books, souvenirs and mementoes ... Possibilities [also] exist for arts and performance centres, galleries, heritage and orientation projects of interest to visitors and locals alike.

It's not my objective here to add to the list of what exactly could, or should, be done by way of enhancing Inverness's amenity. My aim is much more limited. It's simply to advance the general proposition that we should consider making Inverness a worthwhile regional capital: a British, or Scottish, equivalent of Seattle in a British, or Scottish, equivalent of America's Pacific North West. If that's to happen, then in Inverness and the wider Highlands and Islands (as occurred in Seattle and the Pacific North West when, on the back of a 1960s depression in the aircraft industry, that city set out to redefine itself) we'll have to mobilise a big, big range of interests: MPs, MSPs, councillors, business people, the Highlands and Islands population at large.

What I'm suggesting, then, is action of the sort which, when undertaken in Seattle, set that city on the road to becoming what it's since become; action of the sort which, if we want to follow Seattle's example and to enjoy at least something of Seattle's success, we need to take in the years immediately ahead.

In calling, at the minimum, for some consideration of the possibilities, I'm looking for the Highlands and Islands to engage with the national debate which the Scottish Executive attempted to initiate last September when the Executive's Deputy Minister for Culture, Rhona Brankin, launched a publication entitled **The Development of a Policy on Architecture for Scotland**. That publication, billed as a step towards our 'first-ever national policy on architecture', has plenty of instructive thoughts to offer:

Buildings serve us, and we relate to them, in many and complex ways. Their fundamental purpose, of course, is to provide shelter ... Yet

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buildings are more than simply utilitarian products. What we seek from buildings is not wholly practical. Whilst we expect ... our buildings to be stable, durable and efficient, they must also respond to and sustain our social and cultural needs and aspirations ... Buildings, then, are of profound importance ... Good buildings can bring us benefits and be of value in a great number of ways ... Good architecture brings imagination to the solution of our practical problems and reflects what is of value in our lives. Good architecture reshapes for the better our towns, cities and our landscapes. Good architecture affirms regional and national identity and enriches our culture. And good architecture contributes to the development of a built heritage of lasting value.

If we're to turn round our built environment, in Inverness or in the Highlands and Islands more generally, we've no alternative but to sign up to statements of this sort. And having so signed up, we've no alternative either but to take on board the unacceptable inadequacy of what, in the way of a built environment, we have around us now. I quote again from that Scottish Executive policy document:

Much of our built environment remains deeply unsatisfactory. Many new buildings are monotonous, spiritless in design and do not relate to their surroundings. Many parts of our towns and cities have become anonymous and placeless ... For many, there is a lack of confidence in our ability to design and make for ourselves a satisfactory built environment.

In the particular case of Inverness, much the same point was put into best-selling print by one of the Highland capital's more disenchanting visitors, the American writer Bill Bryson. Standing – and I've urged you to follow his lead – on Ness Bridge, Bryson looked east and (as he afterwards reported in **Notes from a Small Island**) discovered 'that an entire town could be ruined by two inanimate structures'. The structures to which Bryson thus took exception are the box-like buildings which, since the 1960s, have occupied the riverbank end of Bridge Street. Bill Bryson thought those buildings 'madly inappropriate to the surrounding scene'. And there's really no dissenting from that verdict – even though, and it pains me as the agency's chairman to admit this, one of the edifices in question was inherited by Highlands and Islands Enterprise and now accommodates our headquarters operation.

Not every modern building in the Highlands and Islands, it's important to stress, is as dire as the one that houses HIE. Eden Court, which I've already mentioned, was and remains, in my opinion, an architectural triumph. Equally striking, and of a lot more recent vintage, are the new campus at Sabhal Mor

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Ostaig on Skye and the Fisheries College at Scalloway on Shetland. But these, and one or two others, are simply the more striking exceptions to what's still a pretty mediocre rule.

To a final extract, then, from **The Development of a Policy on Architecture for Scotland:**

What can we do to improve the quality of ... our built environment? How can we ensure that we get good architecture? What are the conditions necessary for good architecture to flourish? There are no easy answers to these questions ... Good architecture ... demands a commitment to quality from all those who shape and make our buildings for us. Those directly involved in the commissioning, design and construction of buildings bear a heavy responsibility. But the realisation of good architecture is not determined solely by those directly involved. Architecture responds to society's needs and, in so doing, reflects our collective values and aspirations ... The debate, then, as to how we achieve good architecture is not only for a minority nor solely for those directly involved in the procurement ... of our buildings. It is a necessary and worthwhile debate for us all.

We urgently require a Highlands and Islands version of exactly that debate. And it's a debate that ought by no means to be limited to Inverness. Right across the Highlands and Islands – in glens, in straths, on islands which contain, in many instances, far fewer people than they did in neolithic times – there's great scope for rural settlement. Agriculture, as I acknowledged earlier, is in difficulty. But that doesn't mean our countryside has got no future. On the contrary, as farming ceases to be an overwhelmingly dominant land use – on hill ground, in particular – we could, in some locations anyway, let folk have what many folk now want: the chance to live in a non-urban setting where, while not relying on agriculture for their total livelihood, they'd have the scope to be involved, on their own patch of territory, in raising crops, growing trees, keeping livestock. Already people are being permitted to do just that in places like West Lothian. There they call this new departure Lowland crofting. Here in the north of Scotland – where crofting, after all, was first invented – it's vital that we launch some comparable experiments. Hence the significance of what HIE, in collaboration with several other agencies, is trying to do at Orbost on the Isle of Skye – where we'd like a substantial number of people to have homes, operate businesses and, in some instances, manage croft-type smallholdings on an estate that was formerly just one hill farm.

The Highlands and Islands as a Twenty-First-Century Success Story

Getting an initiative like Orbst right, as I have cause to know, is never easy. And getting the wider Highlands and Islands right – making an Atlantic North West of our region – will be a whole lot harder still. But though it may be difficult, the job's perfectly achievable.

As technologies change, as living on thin air gets simpler, as having ready access to attractive landscapes becomes more and more important, the Highlands and Islands are remarkably well placed, or so I've contended here, to emulate what's been accomplished in the vicinity of Seattle. But if we're fully and properly to capitalise on this opportunity, I've also contended, we have to give a high priority to getting our built environment up to scratch.

We need to think imaginatively about the way we want to accommodate both new residents and new enterprises in our countryside. We need to think equally imaginatively about how we turn Inverness into one of our nation's leading urban centres. This is a challenge clearly. But it's a developmental necessity as well.

We've already managed, I stressed earlier, to get high-tech, computer-based and telecommunications-based industry into the Highlands and Islands. But if we're to progress beyond that, if we're to make the Highlands and Islands even half as dynamic, creative, entrepreneurial and energetic as the Pacific North West, then we've got to make the Highlands and Islands the sort of place where dynamic, creative, entrepreneurial and energetic individuals feel at home. The Highlands and Islands, to put the matter mildly, isn't quite this sort of place today. Some of what we're already about – establishing a University of the Highlands and Islands, for instance – will help us put that right. But much, much more than UHI will be required – above all a built environment that matches the exacting standards of our natural surroundings. Creating that built environment, I recognise, could take a hefty slice of this new century. So we should, perhaps, get started very soon.

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