

## **REVIEW: SUSTAINABLE SCOTLAND**

*Daniel Mittler*

Eleanor McDowell and James McCormick (Editors), **Environment  
Scotland: Prospects for Sustainability**, Ashgate, Aldershot, 1999, 223  
pp, ISBN 1 84014 899 3, £37.50.

This book was published with a clear political purpose. In the run-up to the Scottish parliamentary election, it was to show the potential that the parliament has to move Scotland in the direction of sustainable development. It amply succeeds in this task; but the book is even more interesting to read now after the election has passed. Some of its predictions have already been proven wrong; some of the proposals put forward have already been ignored; and some of the contributors are now at the heart of government, e.g. as Minister for Transport and the Environment.

As with most compilations, the quality of the chapters varies widely. The first chapter by the editors is a reasonable summary of the book's articles. The second chapter by David Silbergh is meant to provide the theoretical overview and introduce the complex history of that modern day panacea: sustainable development. It does so, in a fashion, but the selection of the literature sighted seems rather arbitrary. There is no real attempt to suggest what the general literature on sustainability may imply for a Sustainable Scotland. Some Scottish policy documents are quoted, but this chapter never gets far beyond a boring taxonomy of (some of) the literature. A book like this can greatly benefit from a solid theoretical introduction showing common threads in the diverse empirical studies that follow it. Sadly, this chapter fails to provide such guidance.

The third chapter, written by the editors, is a fascinating one, summarising findings on Scottish public attitudes towards the environment. Most of the findings are not surprising; they tend to be in line with other recent studies

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*Daniel Mittler works in the Bartlett School of Planning, University College London and is a member of the Sustainable Europe Research Institute. He lives in Edinburgh.  
<http://www.seri.at/dine.htm>.*

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which suggest that Scottish public opinion may be less different from English public opinion than has previously been assumed. However, nuclear issues have had a higher profile in Scotland than England, and Scots lead the rest of Britain in their enthusiasm for buying organic food. That non car-owners are just as opposed to higher fuel taxes as drivers may come as a shock to some. However, it probably reflects the fact that non car-owners like to think of themselves as 'potential car owners'. Meanwhile, it is exciting to see that ex-Transport Convener David Begg (see below) has clearly left his mark on Edinburgh: the Capital's citizens are keenest on reducing car use and fervently support cycle lanes. McCormick and McDowell present their findings well and include the necessary caveats about the potential inaccuracies of polls. In one respect they go astray, however. They use rather general and loaded categories for 'greenness', including 'using unleaded petrol' and 'recycling'. Thus, they can conclude that car owners who drive to the bottle bank do the 'green thing' more often than other (poorer) households even though they themselves elsewhere point towards such behaviour as ungreen, contradictory and rather ironic.

Chapter Four shows how even well-informed people can easily get things wrong when they dare to dabble in the art of prediction. Lynn Bennie's very readable and knowledgable study of the Scottish Green Party lists a number of reasons why the Scottish Greens are unlikely to gain representation at Holyrood. Now that Robin Harper's smile is known to all of Scotland, these reasons seem, well, rather academic. However, some of them may still limit the Green Party's future success. That the party needs to be bigger and better organised internally can hardly be denied, for example. And though 'competition at the fringes' did not prevent both Tommy Sheridan and Robin Harper from getting elected, it is a real constraint. Had the Greens and the Scottish Socialists, for example, combined forces for the recent European elections, they could have won a seat.

Chapter 5 by McDowell and Chalmers reports on three grassroots initiatives for sustainable development: The Clydeside Campaign against pollution, which successfully fought a toxic incinerator in Renfrew; the Easthall solar housing initiative, which managed to insert 36 super-insulated and solar powered flats into an area of Glasgow where more than a third of the housing stock suffers dampness; and the Different Dundee project, a community newspaper and empowerment initiative which grew out of local concern about a waste incinerator. The stories of these struggles are told well and should be inspiring to community advocats and activists all over Scotland.

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In Chapter Six, Professor David Begg sets out his vision for Local Transport Strategies. This chapter, like the following one by Sarah Boyack, is a particularly fascinating read after the recent controversy over the Scottish Executive's consultation document **Tackling Congestion**. Begg eloquently calls for exactly the things that he has pushed for in the public debate since then: road tolls are a good idea in principle, as they are the most realistic way of generating funds for sustainable transport initiatives. To be acceptable to the public, however, road charges have to be ear-marked for transport improvements and at least some positive changes have to be in place before charges are imposed.

There is nothing in Sarah Boyack's chapter on planning and sustainable development that points to her disagreeing with this analysis (as has recently been suggested by the media). Indeed, Professor Begg and Sarah Boyack agree on most things. They both argue that current local authority funds for transport initiatives are insufficient, and that central government Challenge Fund money (which local authorities have to compete for) is ruefully inadequate; that local government reorganisation has led to policy fragmentation and a distinctive lack of planning coordination; and that there is thus an urgent need for strategic regional planning which both local authorities and the Scottish Parliament must make a priority.

Sarah Boyack also demonstrates a very detailed and impressive knowledge of the planning system which she now presides over. Had she written this article in support of an application for her ministerial portfolio, it would have stood her in good stead. Whether she now can follow through with some of the suggestions she made while still safely enshrined within the walls of the Ivory Tower is less clear, however. So far, there is little evidence that sustainable development has become 'the main priority for the Parliament' as Boyack demanded (p.118). A greenfield development levy, while recently endorsed by the Urban Task Force, does also not seem likely to be implemented soon. Back in March 1999, Sarah Boyack said, rightly, that it will be 'interesting to see whether MSPs are able to resist the temptation to centralise influence in the Parliament', and work in constructive partnership with Local Authorities. She will now have to answer this question to herself. It will be interesting to see whether she can control the centralising instincts of her bureaucrats. At worst, then, this Chapter can provide a checklist of all the things that Sarah Boyack wanted to achieve in Government but never managed to get passed. At best, it contains the blueprint for innovative government over the next few years.

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Chapter 8 and 9 by Andrew Raven and Hugh Raven address the sustainability challenges in rural Scotland. Andrew Raven points to the vast influence that government money (including EU grants) has on the three quarters of Scotland's land mass that is used for agriculture. These subsidies, he argues, could be a strong force for more sustainable rural land management. One suggestion which he shares with Hugh Raven is the creation of a 'code of good land use'. Hugh Raven wants to link such a code with the land reform agenda (the topic of his excellent chapter). Before anyone - individual or community - should be allowed to purchase land, they should have to provide a convincing land management plan. This plan should prove that the prospective owner is capable of taking good care of the land. Hugh Raven also argues that compulsory purchasing rights must be insisted upon by the state. Without such a mechanism, he argues, the state simply lacks sufficient clout to back up any demands for better land management. Sadly, neither of these suggestions are fully reflected in the Scottish Executive's land reform proposals to date. Indeed, Hugh Raven's chapter shows how much more radical the mood on land reform was before the election. He spends quite some time arguing *against* prohibiting large land holdings. (He suggests limiting subsidies and thus discouraging large holdings instead.) Since the election such a radical move has not even been on the agenda.

In Chapter 10, Gloyne and Hutton set out how the energy sector needs to change in order to turn itself into a sustainable industry. They point out that Scotland should be in a good position to lead the way towards a sustainable energy revolution: Scotland currently has 100% overcapacity in its electricity supply and can thus cut back on production. Scotland also has a huge renewable energy potential and, at present, a very inefficiently insulated housing stock, offering great potentials for reducing energy demand. Sadly, their suggestions that the Parliament should promote a house insulation programme and adopt higher building standards have so far fallen on deaf ears. Indeed, though 'fuel poverty' was a key issue during the election, the topic disappeared from view after 6 May 1999. Similarly, the authors' proposal to set up a Renewable Energy Development Agency will have to wait (at the very least) until the Parliament's second term.

In a rather short Chapter 11, Alistair Dalziel provides a business perspective on sustainability. Business is absolutely essential to the implementation of sustainable development. The inclusion of such a chapter can thus only be welcomed. However, the Chapter is rather bland. It above all demonstrates that Dalziel (if, hopefully, not all of business) simply hasn't engaged with the type of sustainable development discourse that characterises the rest of the

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book. Dalziel is purely concerned with efficient business management. His conclusion that 'good environmental management usually means good business' (p.175) is heartening, but it almost seems added on as an afterthought.

Chapter 12 by Peter Strachan is equally disappointing. The chapter reports on the business take-up of EMAS (European Environmental Management Systems). This article has no specific data on Scotland, and spends far too much time reviewing the general literature on EMAS. Its findings may be of interest to those who are trying to implement or study EMAS. The conclusions seemed rather obvious to me, however (business is, surprisingly enough, concerned about the extra costs that EMAS entails, but is interested in the positive public image that having gone through an EMAS process can provide); they failed to justify the inclusion of this chapter.

Luckily, the final chapter once again redeems the book. In it, Kevin Dunion, the Director of Friends of the Earth Scotland, puts Scotland's search for sustainability into global perspective. He points to the irony that Scotland finally regained some of her political sovereignty, just when economic globalisation implies that 'states, far less sub-states, have a markedly diminished ability to implement a distinctive ... set of policies' (p.202). Indeed, Dunion's Chapter is unique in raising a flag of caution about the powers of the new Parliament even before the election. Dunion criticises the inability of the Parliament to vary taxes on energy and pollution due to the 'unnecessarily narrow financial settlement' of the Scotland Act (p.203). He warns that the Scottish Parliament might drag its feet over the implementation of EU directives on the environment, as the current devolution agreement makes no provision for direct Scottish representation at the EU level. If Scotland isn't (seen to be) given a fair hearing in Brussels, why should it swiftly implement Brussels wishes? The same is true for other international agreements, particularly those on trade. Dunion forcefully argues that Scots must be included in discussions on what the UK position will be at international fora. If Westminster ever tried to implement anything like the (for now aborted) Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI) over the heads of MSPs, Dunion rightly expects a huge backlash.

For a long-term campaigner for devolution, then, Dunion takes a rather cautious line, alerting us all to the fact that Scotland does not exist in isolation but must find its pathway towards sustainability in a global, and often ruthless, market economy. That is not to say, however, that Dunion has stopped believing in the power of devolution. His conclusion is an apt ending to this powerful and important book: 'Anticipating and acting to secure

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higher air quality standards or better bathing water, and implementing even more stringent planning regulations ..., would of course mean adopting differential standards north and south of the Border. The capacity to do so is the whole point of devolution.' (p.213).

To have sketched out some of the things that the Scottish Parliament *could* do is the true value of Environment Scotland. Despite some weak chapters this book should therefore be compulsory reading - not just for MSPs.

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