

SCOTLAND'S NEW DEMOCRACY: OPPORTUNITIES FOR RURAL SCOTLAND?

John Fairley

INTRODUCTION

The creation of the Scottish Parliament, and the processes leading up to this constitutional breakthrough, have led to unprecedented levels of interest, debate and publication regarding Scottish politics and policy. However, to date little of this flurry of democratic and intellectual activity has set out from the perspectives and the defined interests of rural Scotland. In broad terms this situation indicates the opportunities and the threats which the new governance arrangements seem to offer to Scotland's rural communities and citizens.

It is possible now for the elected politicians, the institutions, and the active citizens of rural Scotland to engage with this new level of activity, and, in so doing, provide more effective 'voice' for rural Scotland, and gain a greater prominence and influence within the Scottish polity. However, it is equally possible that the failure to so engage will lead to the continued or even increased marginalisation of rural society and its concerns, in a Scotland where the dominant culture is, in Professor Smout's (1994, p.267) view, 'emphatically an urban culture', and where the national media is largely based in the main urban centres and focused on Edinburgh.

In this paper, I wish to argue that unprecedented opportunities now exist for rural Scotland to benefit from constitutional change, but that these opportunities will need to be actively addressed and exploited, and that the 'window of opportunity' to secure positive change may not be left open

John Fairley is professor in the Department of Environmental Planning, University of Strathclyde. This paper was presented to the 'Scottish Parliament and Rural Policy: What Room for Manoeuvre?' Conference, University of Aberdeen, November 3rd, 1999. The author received helpful comments on a draft from Greg Lloyd, Eleanor McDowell, Lindsay Paterson, Paolo Vestri and Sally Watson.

Scottish Affairs

indefinitely. It may be, for example, that if there is a failure to make progress on implementing the promised new style of politics over the next 18 months or so, then the old style will remain in place, and the imperative of the next election will predominate. In the course of the paper, I will report on research which I carried out in 1998¹, before the Parliament was established, to try to ascertain the expectations and aspirations that Scotland's rural local authorities held for the new era of 'subsidiarity'.

THE PROCESSES OF CONSTITUTIONAL CHANGE

The 1990s saw a number of important 'moments' in the ongoing process of constitutional change. The most important of these was undoubtedly the Parliamentary election on 6 May 1999. However, there were others, including: the publication, during the 'dark days' when real progress still seemed to be impossible, of the so-called 'Convention Scheme' (SCC 1995), a very important document, to which we will return; the reform of the Scottish local government system in 1995/96; Labour's victory in the 1997 UK elections; the publication of the White Paper in July 1997 (Scottish Office 1997a) which sold out faster than the winners of literary prizes, such was the level of interest; the decisive referendum of 11 September 1997; the passing of the Scotland Act in 1998; and, the publication of the first, over-arching Concordats (UK Government 1999) between the governments of the UK and Scotland. A casual examination of the 1998 Scotland Act reveals the attempts to build in some flexibility to allow for future change, and therefore the likelihood that further changes will occur.

It is important to recall that rural Scotland made active and positive inputs to the change process during the 1990s. The main institutions that are 'of' rural Scotland, namely the elected local authorities, for the most part supported the work of the Constitutional Convention. Councils from Shetland to the Stewartry signed up as members of the Convention. One partly rural Council, Grampian Region, survived a legal challenge to the effect that its support was ultra vires. Indeed without the support of local government, and the

² *I would like to record my thanks to elected members and senior officials in Aberdeenshire, Highland, Moray, Perth and Kinross, and Shetland Councils for the time which they took to discuss the issues with me in the early months of 1998. Clearly these discussions took place before the 1999 local government elections, and involved individuals. They cannot therefore be taken as indicative of the current policy positions of these councils.*

Opportunities for Rural Scotland?

Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (CoSLA) it is very doubtful that a Parliament could have been in place so quickly² after the 1997 UK election.

It is also very important to recall that rural Scotland wanted and voted for this Parliament. In the 1979 Referendum, rural and urban Scotland were both divided. In 1997, all 32 electoral divisions were quite decisively in favour of a Parliament (Dewdney 1997; Pattie et al 1998), the first of the two referendum questions. This is important because the Scotland-wide support formed the basis for the legitimacy of the Parliament. The 'Yes' vote on the first question, amongst the 14 Councils which are regarded as 'rural'³ by the Scottish Office (1997b, p.8), ranged from a high 81.1% in East Ayrshire to 57.3% in Orkney (Dewdney 1997). The 14-Council average was 66.9%, compared with the Scotland-wide average of 74.3%.

Nevertheless, while rural Scotland was clear and decisive in its support for the establishment of the Parliament, there is evidence that urban Scotland was more enthusiastic in its support. In the 'league table of enthusiasm' for setting up a Parliament (see Dewdney 1997, p.13) we find only East Ayrshire and the Western Isles in the top twelve, while rural areas fill all of the bottom 12 slots.

Rural Scotland's support for the Parliament provides a very important opportunity. It has been argued that 'goodwill' and 'mutual considerateness' are important new democratic values, the first to ensure joint working by the two types of Member of the Scottish Parliament⁴ (MSP), the latter to ensure good relations between the different levels of democracy (Scottish Affairs Committee 1998, p.x and xii) by which Scotland is now governed. Perhaps

² *Without local government support the Convention would have been without a resource base sufficient to produce its consensual 'Scheme' in 1995. In the absence of the Convention, the likelihood is that, after the 1997 General Election, the UK Government would have had to undertake at least extensive consultations, if not a full-scale Enquiry, to draw up a blue-print for change. And there can be no guarantee that rural Scotland would have been quite so enthusiastic about proposals emanating from a Labour Government.*

³ *These are the islands Councils of Orkney, Shetland and the Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, together with the mainland Councils for Aberdeenshire, Angus, Argyll and Bute, Dumfries and Galloway, East Ayrshire, Highland, Moray, Perth and Kinross, Scottish Borders, South Ayrshire and Stirling*

⁴ *73 MSPs were elected on the traditional 'first past the post' system, with a further 56 elected on a 'closed regional list system' which was designed to correct for disproportionality at the level of the 8 EU constituencies in Scotland (Himsworth and Munro 1998).*

Scottish Affairs

there are rural dimensions to the implementation of these new political values, and the clear support for the Parliament in rural areas provides the basis for mutual regard to be built between urban and rural Scotland.

The elections of 6 May 1999 propelled to Edinburgh a number of politicians who represent rural constituencies or who were elected from the list system in regions which are largely or partly rural. In an exaggerated claim, which perhaps reflected the ebullience of the times, the Scottish Office argued that

The electoral arrangements for the new Parliament, involving an important element of proportional representation, will guarantee that the rural voice is heard loud and clear.

(1997b, p.4)

Even the best electoral system is unable to guarantee that 'voice' is expressed, let alone heard. What is clear, however, is that the 1999 election created the possibility of much more input into politics and policy-making from rural Scotland than ever before. Indeed, the numbers of MSPs who have rural interests, and the 'regional' nature of the list system, may enable the many voices of contemporary rural Scotland to be expressed.

THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE PARLIAMENT

A considerable effort was put into designing the Parliament and its ways of working to ensure that these would be modern, and very different from Westminster. Some of these design elements may provide opportunities for rural Scotland.

One aspiration which lay behind the choice of electoral system was to create a style of politics which was more representative of Scottish public opinion, and more consensual in its decision-making. It was widely believed that, given the nature of the chosen electoral system, it would prove very difficult for any political party, including the hegemonic Labour Party, to gain an outright majority. And indeed the first Scottish Government is a coalition of Labour and Liberal Democrat MSPs, which has thrust some rural MSPs into powerful positions within the Executive, and within the Committee system. The Deputy First Minister, is Jim Wallace, who represents Orkney for the Liberal Democrats. Within the Executive, Liberal Democrat MSP Ross Finnie is the Minister for Rural Affairs. Until Henry McLeish's reshuffle in October 2000, Labour's John Home Robertson was Deputy Minister and had special responsibility for fisheries, a fact which led to him being the first MSP to be part of a UK delegation to the European Council of Ministers in October 1999, under the terms of the first Concordat agreement (UK

Opportunities for Rural Scotland?

Government 1999). Peter Peacock and Alasdair Morrison are Deputy Ministers. Rural Scotland is also well represented by the spokespersons of the Parliamentary opposition, the Scottish National Party.

It was intended that the Parliament should establish a Committee system. The Committees were intended to be devices for holding the Executive to account, mechanisms for building up real resources in terms of policy expertise, possible initiators of legislation, and devices for overseeing the procedures and probity of the Parliament. The 16 Committees established by the first Parliament were: Audit; Education, Culture and Sport; Enterprise and Lifelong Learning; Equal Opportunities; European; Finance; Health and Community Care; Justice and Home Affairs; Local Government; Procedures; Public Petitions; Rural Affairs; Social Inclusion, Housing and Voluntary Sector; Standards; Subordinate Legislation; and, Transport and Environment (Scottish Parliament 1999). The Parliament's Rural Affairs Committee is convened by Alex Johnstone, a farmer and Conservative MSP from North East Scotland. The Rural Affairs Committee has a broad remit which includes agriculture, fisheries and rural development.

The establishment of policy Committees should lead to the creation of genuine policy expertise, which in turn should lead to better informed policy making. However, at the time of writing each policy committee is supported by only two or three public servants, which seems very inadequate, given the complexity of the tasks facing the Committees, and in particular the great resources which support the Executive.

The Committees, if they are effective, could lead to some recentralising of policy expertise in Edinburgh. A corollary of the pursuit of social exclusion in the 1980s and 1990s was the externalisation of policy expertise as a reduced role was sought for the central state. Policy expertise was externalised to major 'quangos', or Non Departmental Public Bodies such as Scottish Enterprise and Scottish National Heritage, to Agencies, and to so-called strategic partnerships, for example, the European Structural Fund Partnerships (Danson et al 1999). These processes are now conventionally regarded by political scientists as representing an internal and voluntary 'hollowing out' of the state (Rhodes 1997), which results in a reduced capacity for policy-making and service provision.

In the early months of 1998 opinion was divided, at least in rural local authorities⁵, as to the desirability of setting up a Rural Affairs Committee.

⁵ *Discussions and interviews with the author.*

Scottish Affairs

Some supported this approach, seeing it as a means of providing a focal point for the discussion of rural affairs, a means of holding the Executive accountable to rural perspectives, and an opportunity to build up a real centre of expertise which would lead to better rural development policy. Those who feared that the sheer volume of work facing the fledgling Parliament might lead to the marginalisation of rural concerns (Rennie 1996) no doubt viewed the setting up of the Rural Affairs Committee as essential. Others opposed setting up a Rural Affairs Committee, arguing that this could lead to the marginalisation of rural concerns within the Parliament. Their preference was for rural policy to be made a priority matter for all of the policy Committees, with a Government Minister co-ordinating the various Committee efforts. On this view, the Rural Affairs Committee may need to be effective in its own workings, and also in influencing other policy committees of the Parliament.

It is too early to come to any conclusions on this particular discussion. However, it is clear that there are particular opportunities for rural Scotland to influence the thinking of the Ministerial team and of the Parliamentary Committee. There are also opportunities to influence the thinking and the agendas of the Rural Affairs and the other policy committees in so far as they will address issues which are rural priorities, and in so far as rural Scotland wants to influence or lead national debates. And these opportunities simply could not have been made available without the Parliament.

The Scottish Office argued that devolution is particularly important to rural Scotland:

Some of the devolved areas of responsibility, such as agriculture, fishing and forestry, or the environment, are of obvious rural concern, but the relevance of devolution to rural areas goes broader than this. In housing, education, health, transport, economic development and many other sectors in which rural Scotland has distinct needs, decisions will be made in Scotland.

(1997b, p.5)

However rural Scotland needs quickly to develop the capacity to engage with the Parliament in ways which will enable rural thinking to influence debate in all of these areas. In order to be effective rural Scotland is likely to need a considerably enhanced research and policy capacity, and one that, to some extent, reflects the Committee system of the Parliament, while remaining capable of focusing on rural priorities. Rural Scotland is likely also to need to keep pressure on the Parliament to ensure that some of the available research funding is allocated to rural priorities.

Opportunities for Rural Scotland?

The question of research which is relevant to rural Scotland presents a major challenge to Scotland's rural institutions, and to those who currently fund research. The larger local authorities, CoSLA, Highlands and Islands Enterprise, Scottish Enterprise, some of the Local Enterprise Companies, and other publicly-funded bodies may need to give more priority to funding research, and building 'policy capacity', and perhaps to doing these things together. The new Higher Education initiatives in rural areas - the University of the Highlands and Islands, and Crichton College in Dumfries - may be able to contribute once they are more fully developed. In the shorter term there is an opportunity to give rural Scotland a clear place in deciding on research priorities for Scotland, and in the commissioning and management of research.

A beginning could be made by the Rural Affairs Committee working with the institutions of rural Scotland, in particular the local authorities, to establish a research agenda. Raven (1999) has called for long term research into land ownership and management. In the broader process, the Committee could assess the discussion of rural policy issues in Wales (Midmore et al 1994; Midmore 1998), Northern Ireland (Murray and Greer 1993), the Republic of Ireland (Commins 1993), and the wider international community. Any consensually supported research agenda which emerges may then provide the basis for discussion with the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council, and the Government and local government agencies which commission research.

WHAT DOES 'RURAL' MEAN IN CONTEMPORARY SCOTLAND?

The debate over the meaning of 'rural' is too wide-ranging to be fully reviewed in this article. However, it is important to acknowledge that different concepts of 'rural' operate in public policy in Scotland. Underlying most of the available definitions is one of two assumptions: that classification is really about placing localities at the appropriate place on a continuum of societal types which runs from the 'truly urban' to the 'truly rural', or that classification concerns the placing of localities at the appropriate point on some scale of 'rural-urban transition' (Blunden et al 1998).

However, the concept is, to some extent, contested, and that means that choices are available. In the new framework of Parliamentary democracy it may be possible to revisit this issue with the aim of encouraging rural Scotland to express its views regarding the definitions which underpin and to some extent drive policy. In examining the available concepts of 'rural' we find the theoretical, where the debates seem to be sharpest (eg Ray 1999), the

Scottish Affairs

pragmatic and the practical, where we find difference in the actual concepts which policies seek to implement.

The Parliament and its Rural Affairs Committee in particular provide a clear opportunity to modernise concepts of 'rural' which prioritise the interests and values of rural communities. The need and the opportunity for this is perhaps clearest at the time of writing in the emerging, and unusually polarised debate over land reform, which is often, as Wightman (1999) points out in his trenchant critique of the Government's proposals (Scottish Executive 1999b), conceptualised as a 'rural', or even a 'highland' matter. Within the Parliament, land reform is primarily a matter for the Justice Committee, although Rural Affairs is expected to take a close interest. In his foreword to the Government's proposals, Jim Wallace, the Deputy First Minister, argues that land reform 'is crucial for rural Scotland'. While few would deny this, perhaps land reform has a much wider significance, for the whole of Scotland.

As the Scottish Office put it in its discussion paper on rural development, 'land is a defining issue for the people of Scotland' (1997, p.7). However within Scotland-wide concerns that the parliament should quickly introduce effective land reforms, perhaps there are different priorities for rural and urban communities. For the inhabitants of urban Scotland, the great majority of the population, issues of amenity and access dominate discussion of how rural Scotland should be owned and managed. However, in rural Scotland other issues may take priority. Dr James Hunter (1999b) has argued that land reform is to be valued primarily because of its positive effects on the potential for rural development:

For land reform, in the end, is not about Acts of Parliament. Nor is it even about ridding the Highlands and Islands, or the rest of rural Scotland, of bad landlords. What makes land reform important is the fact that, as has been proved in Abriachan, it can create new and exciting opportunities both for communities and for the individuals who constitute such communities. It can, as has clearly happened in Abriachan, enhance people's self-confidence; it can give them a new ability to shape their locality's future; it can facilitate access to revenues that would not otherwise be available; it can ultimately, as it is starting to do at Abriachan, generate employment.

The point is that, on the future of the land, on other key policy issues such as transport, and more generally, there is now a better opportunity, through open debate, to balance urban and rural perspectives of what 'rural' means. And that may help to achieve greater consistency in policy thinking, and perhaps more appropriate policies, than currently exist.

Opportunities for Rural Scotland?

We have noted the Scottish Office view that there are 14 rural local governments in Scotland. Starting from a different (and perhaps equally arbitrary) basis for classification CoSLA believes that there are 19, which is interesting because this would mean that a clear majority of Scotland's councils would be seen as rural, which presumably should have implications for local government policy more generally. And CoSLA also argues that a larger number still have a strong interest in rural policy development. CoSLA (1998) believes that 21 local governments 'have a major interest' in the reform of the European Common Agricultural Policy (CAP).

However the definitions of 'rural' are developed, they will need to retain some consistency with developments in EU policies. The Agenda 2000 proposals (Scottish Office 1999b) concerned reforms to the European Social Fund, and to the Common Agricultural Policy, as well as a proposed new European Rural Development Regulation (Agriculture Select Committee 1999). The Regulation will be implemented by the Parliament, and it is clearly important that rural Scotland should be able to influence the choice of implementation mechanisms.

There is a general agreement that new ways must be found to sustain a 'countryside that can no longer be dependent on the hegemony of subsidised agriculture' (Blunden et al 1998, p.150), and a welcoming of the declining importance of agriculture in the definition of 'rural'. Agriculture has generally become less important as a source of rural employment, and therefore less definitive of community in the sense of communities being defined by their main economic activities. Agriculture has become more efficient, particularly through the application of technology, a process which is questioned from the perspectives of the rural economy and rural sustainability by Midmore et al (1994). Agriculture remains highly subsidised, but the structures of subsidy are being changed to encourage 'agri-environmental' developments, through a mix of flat rate and negotiated payments (Hughes 1995), and to encourage patterns of diversification which contribute to broader processes of rural development (Midmore et al 1994).

Blunden (et al 1998) look at rural areas in Europe and offer a five-fold classification of urban imprint zones, high amenity areas, developed and balanced areas, areas with development potential, and areas which require economic restructuring. The classification is based upon five main sets of issues: accessibility, settlement characteristics, population characteristics, a socio-economic profile, and access to telematics systems.

A recent Scottish Office publication attempted to capture the variety of contemporary rural economies. Mackay Consultants examined the availability

Scottish Affairs

of a wide range of services for the Central Research Unit of the Scottish Office in 1996. Their study examined 50 locations and distinguished seven types of rural community defined by their main economic activity: see Table 1.

Table 1
Types of Rural Community

Type of Economy	Number of Communities	Average Population
Mixed	18	2020
Agricultural	12	743
Commuter	5	3199
Tourism	11	2034
Defence	1	747
Crofting	1	96
Fishing	2	1073

source: Mackay Consultants 1996, p.4

Mackay's analysis is an important one. It examines communities in terms of their main economic activities, and in terms of their ability to access private, public and voluntary services. The related issues of production and consumption must be important to our understanding of 'rural'. However, the study has its limitations. It considers the issue of access to council offices, but not whether people are able to access local politicians, which now seems to have been made a rather difficult matter in parts of the highlands and islands, by the persistent policy of reducing the number of elected politicians (Fairley 1998). And it tells us little about the dynamics of these communities, whether they are growing, whether they are in some sort of homeostasis, whether they are in decline, or whether they are 'fragile'.

The Scottish Office and researchers at the University of Aberdeen developed a Rural Life Update analysis which identified three types of rural community classified by degree of remoteness, settlement pattern, population density, demographic structures and employment trends. By these criteria rural communities are defined as 'commuter', 'intermediate' or 'remote' (Scottish Office 1999c, p.5). And work is underway to develop a common database which may be used by a range of policy-making institutions.

Opportunities for Rural Scotland?

While economic categories are important, there is also much more that constitutes 'rural': local politics, culture, the demographic characteristics of communities, access to post-compulsory education, access to transport and to modern technologies, and so on. Perhaps the quest for modern definitions of 'rural' is akin to the search for the 'personalities' of rural Scotland (Greer and Murray 1993), along with what Braudel (1985) might have termed the 'structures of their everyday lives'. The latter would include, for example, the 'infra economy' of self-sufficiency, as well as the statistical information of the market. And of course, in the new and more mature Scotland, these issues would be approached with the expectation that, individuals and territories may have 'multiple selves' (Ray 1999).

In the absence of this much-needed redefinition, rural policy and discussions of rural development are vulnerable to the charge that the term 'rural' is historically redundant, having been rendered so by the coming together of globalisation and late modernity. Ray (1999) argues that concerns for the 'rural' should give way either to a focus on territories, which may happen to be in rural locations, or to marginalised social groups who may happen to live in rural areas. This thesis is not without interest perhaps to the Rural Affairs Committee (although it may require a change of name!), in that it allows for easier consideration of the linkages between the 'local' and the 'non local'. And it is interesting that, in relation to 'sustainable development', the broad approach to policy which is being prioritised by the new Parliament, the Scottish Office (1999c) seems to have developed in a way which recognises neither 'rural' nor 'urban', but only 'local', in the form of the local policy approach known as 'local agenda 21'. The remit agreed by the Parliament's Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee in 1999, for its Inquiry into local economic development, made no reference at all to rural concerns or needs.

THE PRINCIPLE OF 'SUBSIDIARITY' AND THE QUESTIONS OF DEVOLUTION AND DECENTRALISATION WITHIN SCOTLAND

The Convention Scheme (SCC 1995) envisaged the implementation within Scotland of the principle of 'subsidiarity'. It took this to mean that power would flow from the UK Parliament to the Edinburgh Parliament, from Edinburgh to Scotland's local authorities, and from there to Scotland's communities. The 1997 White Paper (Scottish Office 1997a) reiterated this approach. In its discussion paper on rural development, the Scottish Office argued that

Scottish Affairs

The Government wants not only to devolve power from London to Edinburgh, but from the Scottish Office to local authorities, and from local government to local communities.
(1997b, p.5)

This suggests that there is an enhanced role in the future for rural local authorities. Unfortunately, however, there is no Committee of the Parliament that is charged with promoting and taking forward subsidiarity. Perhaps the Local Government Committee is the most likely to take an early interest, although that Committee seems already to be developing a crowded agenda.

The 14 authorities which are regarded as rural by the Scottish Office (1997b) are already very important to their communities, and collectively for their contribution to the governance of Scotland. They are amongst the major providers of jobs, employing 58,000 (full time equivalent) staff in 1996. They had expenditures of £1.8bn (revenue) and £279m (capital) in 1996-97 (Scottish Office 1997b, p.8). In terms of public services which are vital to rural communities and their development⁶, the 14 councils owned over 168,000 public sector houses (some 25% of the Scottish total), more than 1,070 primary schools (40% of the total), and over 160 secondary schools (40% of the total).

And they are no less important politically, to Scotland's local democracy. The 14 rural authorities have a combined total of 519 councillors⁷, more than 42% of the Scottish total, although of course the political character of this group of councils is quite different from those in non-rural Scotland. The three most obvious points of difference are, first, that much of rural Scotland votes for individuals who are not members of political parties, a situation which urban Scotland tends to regard as 'politically backward' or pre-modern, and not as the outcome of positive political choice. In rural Scotland, non-partisan politics are viewed much more positively, and sometimes as democratically superior to party regimes where decisions are often based on party 'whipping', rather than on rational discussion. The largest group of rural councillors, 186 or 36%, are independent politicians. Independent councillors run six councils - Argyll and Bute, Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, Highland, Moray, Orkney and Shetland - and play a strong role in the 3 coalition local governments in Aberdeenshire, Dumfries and Galloway, and Scottish Borders.

⁶ *CoSLA and SLGIU 1999, and SOEID 1997.*

⁷ *COSLA and SLGIU 1999.*

Opportunities for Rural Scotland?

The second point is that most of rural Scotland is beyond the hegemony of the Labour Party. 89 or 17% of the rural councillors are Labour. The Labour Party has majority administrations in East and South Ayrshire, and it has half of Stirling's councillors where it also forms the administration. And Labour is involved in the coalition governments in Perth and Kinross, and Dumfries and Galloway.

The third point is that the politics of rural Scotland provide a fairly sharp contrast to the Labour-dominated urban centres. Rural Scotland is not dominated by any one political force, and some areas, the rural North East, for example, are characterised by a high degree of competitiveness: see Table 2.

Table 2
Politics of Rural Councils

Political Group	Number of Politicians	% of Rural Total
Independent	186	36
Scottish National Party	103	20
Labour	89	17
Liberal Democrat	84	16
Conservative	57	11
Total	519	100

Note: the total for the Independents includes 2 Scottish Independents who were elected to Moray Council.

Source: COSLA and SLGIU 1999.

It may be that, in the context of a more democratic Scotland, these political differences will encourage new forms of collaboration between rural councils in order better to influence the discussions of the Parliament's various policy committees. The Scottish Parliament provides an opportunity to develop a new approach to local government policy, in which the distinctive aspects of rural councils are recognised and supported.

While these 14 councils together are a formidable resource, and a potentially important force in Scottish policy-making, at present the only forum available to them is CoSLA's rural affairs committee. Ironically, the rural councils

Scottish Affairs

come together within an institution which is widely perceived as being dominated by its urban (and Labour) members. The new context provided by the Parliament provides an opportunity to consider whether other mechanisms might be desirable, for example, an annual conference for rural councils, a research consortium to address those issues which are of concern to all or most of the 14, and those areas where a rural input to national discussions is considered to be important.

There is no doubt that rural local authorities expect powers to be devolved to them by the Parliament⁸, and also expect to be given a 'power of general competence'.⁹ The local authority leaders - politicians and senior employees - suggested a wide range of responsibilities which could quickly be devolved to local authorities, and which they felt able quickly to take on, provided the appropriate resources were also made available¹⁰. The priorities for devolution varied between councils. The list included:

- The immediate initiation of a thorough, objective review of local government finance, which examines practice in the other small countries of Europe, and which examines all possible local tax instruments, including local income tax and tourism taxes.
- The simplification of local government finance in order to make it more locally transparent, and the ending of 'challenge' type bidding systems (which were perceived as tending to lead to resource transfers to urban areas).
- A greater say in transport planning and in roads building and maintenance.
- A strong role in the provision of public transport.
- Greater autonomy in education policy.
- Lead roles in the 'New Deals' and in 'lifelong learning'.

⁸ *Discussions with the author.*

⁹ *This has been recommended by the McIntosh Commission (McIntosh 1999) which was set up by the Labour Government to report on relations between local government and the Parliament. The Scottish Executive is, at the time of writing, decidedly 'luke warm' about this proposal (Scottish Executive 1999).*

¹⁰ *It appears that the European Charter of Local Self Government, which the UK Labour Government adopted in 1997, requires that local authorities enjoy a form of 'general competence' (SCC 1995, p.17), and that responsibilities devolved to local authorities must be fully funded.*

Opportunities for Rural Scotland?

- The return of water and sewerage services.
- The return of child protection services.
- A closer relationship with Further Education Colleges, but not a return to direct control.
- A mechanism for bringing the activities of the Local Enterprise Companies into the framework of local democratic accountability.
- A continuing direct role in housing provision, as owner and landlord, and an enhanced capacity for new-build.
- A clear role in Health, and the ability to provide some local accountability framework for Boards and Trusts.
- The lead role in nature conservation and environmental protection, and the local and regional management of natural resources.
- The lead role in tourism - planning, funding and regulation.
- Control over tourism angling.
- A clear role in the management of the Common Agricultural and Fisheries Policies¹¹.
- The lead roles in managing inshore fisheries and regulating aquaculture.
- Control over Crown Estates (in particular the sea bed) and their rental income.
- A re-examination of the roles of all Non Departmental Public Bodies (NDPBs)¹² and whether their roles should transfer to local authorities.
- In those cases where NDPBs are retained, the ability to hold them to account for their local operations.
- A Parliamentary Committee for the Islands¹³.

¹¹ *The Parliament is the implementing authority for the European CAP and CFP.*

¹² *Strangely, the Scottish Executive (1999, p.8), in its response to McIntosh, claims that this is 'already being implemented' through the device of the so-called 'Prior Options Reviews'. A casual examination of any of these Reviews will demonstrate two things: first, that this aspect of the Review has not always been thorough; and, second, that the in-house manner of the Review is simply not consistent with the requirements of the new, inclusive, political values and style of the Parliament.*

Scottish Affairs

Clearly it is not possible, in this paper, to support or to deny any of these policy claims. The point is rather that, if the Minister for Local Government, or perhaps more likely, the Committee, wishes to consider how best to implement 'subsidiarity', which was so central to the Convention scheme, then rural and island local government seem already to have a range of possibilities in mind. In his evaluation of rural land use agencies, Mackay (1995, p.214) considers the future of bodies such as the Forestry Commission and Scottish National Heritage, and concludes that 'the local authority option is not quite as far-fetched as it might seem'. He goes on to point out that 'local government plays a significant part in nature conservation in Germany, France and Spain, and in forestry in Germany, Austria, Switzerland and Scandinavia'.

The Parliament provides the opportunity to consider whether these and other functions should become local government responsibilities, but clearly many of the above suggestions fall beyond the boundaries of the Rural Affairs Committee. And, for its part, if rural local government is serious about securing an enhanced role in any of these areas of policy then effective mechanisms for placing them on the Parliament's agenda need to be found. And here the architecture of the Parliament, and in particular the Committee remits, may tend to fragment any attempt to make a strategic case for policy devolution.

Dr James Hunter (1999), the Chairman of Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE), has argued that there should be some further devolution of governmental structures and processes within Scotland, so that the highlands and islands can have more autonomy and more democracy at the regional level. The case for this development lies primarily in the cultural distinctiveness of this particular 'rural' area, and on the need to have a democratic accountability framework for specifically highland policies and institutions. Once again, the Parliament provides a place to which ideas may be taken, and a democratic framework within which they may be discussed.

There are also related issues of decentralisation, and we can distinguish issues that affect central government from those which operate at local level. McQuaid (1999) has shown the uneven distribution of Government jobs, and the over-concentration in Edinburgh. In addressing these issues, there is no reason why some parts of rural Scotland should not be considered for the

¹³ *In the Republic of Ireland, the islands are now 'a distinct policy target' (Cross and Nutley 1999, p.329), following the establishment of a collective voice for the islands in the mid 1980s.*

Opportunities for Rural Scotland?

relocation of government offices and jobs. The only requirements, apart from the availability of suitable buildings or sites, is reasonable access by road, rail or air transport.

It is important to note that, while the local authorities believed that a wide range of new responsibilities should be devolved to them, they did not generally expect this to occur. Indeed the general expectation, which was reflected in the discussions of 1998, was that the Parliament would quickly turn its back on the Convention Scheme, and become a centralising force within Scotland. It was argued that politicians in Edinburgh, under pressure from the electorate to deliver improvements in key policy areas like health, education and the economy (Brown et al 1999), within a four-year term of office, would want tight, central control. It is perhaps stating the obvious to observe that, in any centralisation of power by the Parliament within Scotland, rural and island Scotland stand to be the major losers. Perhaps there is an opportunity, and a need, for rural Scotland to become the custodians of the key values which are at the heart of the Convention scheme - decentralisation, devolution within Scotland, and 'subsidiarity'- with a view to making sure that these values continue to underpin reform.

The 1994 Local Government (Scotland) Act required Scotland's new unitary councils to develop schemes for the decentralisation of council business. Three rural councils - Aberdeenshire, Argyll and Bute and Highland - have developed innovative structures based on Area Committees. It is quite clear that, at least for some areas of council business - local planning and development control, for example - decision-making is being taken closer to communities, more people are taking an active interest and are attending meetings, new roles are being developed by Community Councils, and much better relations are being formed with the local press and media. It is not clear how far the decentralisation of local government can be taken or should be taken. However, the experience of these three rural councils could usefully be considered by a joint meeting of the Parliament's Rural Affairs and Local Government Committees.

POLICY-MAKING AND INSTITUTIONS - NEW APPROACHES?

The Parliament is intended to be more open and inclusive in its discussions and its policy-making. It is not clear just how open policy processes will become. However, what is important is that something quite new is being attempted in Scotland, and that this is bound to create new opportunities for rural Scotland. Indeed rural Scotland is likely to have views as to what 'inclusiveness' means.

Scottish Affairs

The Enterprise and Life-long Learning Committee has started the very welcome practice of meeting in different parts of Scotland¹⁴. The Rural Affairs Committee will be expected to visit, and to hold meetings in, rural areas, as should all of the Parliament's policy committees.

Any new style of policy making is likely to present new types of opportunity for setting and influencing policy agendas. The issue for rural Scotland may well be how best to prepare in order to be able to exploit these opportunities when they arise.

There is an opportunity now to examine the 'institutional capacity' of rural Scotland. The Highlands and Islands arguably have a richer institutional framework than other rural areas. In part this is a reflection of the area's cultural distinctiveness, but probably more important is the history of economic policy intervention stretching back to the implementation of the 1846 Drainage Act (Devine 1995, p.167). The relative institutional richness of the area has led to perceptions in other rural localities of a public spending bias in favour of the highlands, and to calls for the establishment of new institutions, particularly to support economic development in the Borders (Chisholm 1998). The point here is neither to support nor to oppose such claims. It is rather that there is now an opportunity to examine the institutional framework in all of Scotland's rural areas, to establish whether it is adequate for development purposes, and to enable these areas to contribute to the broader politics of Scotland.

The new, evolving approach to public policy suggests that there will, in the future, be new aspects of institutional and policy evaluation. New questions will be asked of policies and institutions. In examining the institutional framework of our rural communities, it might be important to distinguish those bodies which are genuinely 'of' rural Scotland from those which are merely 'present in' rural Scotland. It would be useful to ask of the latter, to what extent, and by what processes, they are influenced by rural Scotland. The Scottish Office (1997b, p.8) argued that for rural Scotland, 'a further key challenge is to revitalise democracy into institutional processes'. In a sense this challenge comprises the rural dimensions of the process which Giddens (1999) labels 'the democratising of democracy'.

Commenting on the 1980s and most of the 1990s, Jock Young observes that 'the transition from modernity to late modernity can be seen as a movement from an inclusive to an exclusive society' (1999, p.7). In the new context, it

¹⁴ *The Committee met in Inverness on October 20th 1999.*

Opportunities for Rural Scotland?

will be important to consider how 'inclusive' institutions are in terms of their constitutions and their practices. The Scottish Office recently argued that for the future of rural development in Scotland,

The key to achieving sustainable development in all three of its facets - economic, social and environmental - is to put local people in the position of subjects of their own development rather than objects of development. (1997b, p.3)

This would suggest a quite new way of assessing the appropriateness of institutions, which might usefully sit alongside the more traditional evaluations of institutional effectiveness (Mackay 1995). This would enable a reassessment of these institutions which were set during the pursuit of social exclusion in the 1980s and 1990s.

Such an approach could lead, for example, to the value of Local Enterprise Companies (LECs) being called into question in two ways: first, both the White Paper of 1998 and the Enterprise and New Towns (Scotland) Act of 1990 are quite clear and explicit that the LECs are designed to be exclusive in terms of the membership of their boards of management. The LECs are designed to reflect and to promote a highly exclusive approach to policy making for local economic development. The LECs became devices for helping to form, and empower, local elites, to take forward development policies in ways which are not locally accountable. The second point is that the LECs are established as companies, under the Companies legislation, and this fact ties board members to the interests of the company, and separates them, to a large extent, from the interests of their communities. This has been a source of frustration for elected councillors who have found themselves on LEC boards.

In one sense this is easy to remedy. As the Scottish Affairs Committee of the House of Commons pointed out in 1995, the 1990 Act does not require Scotland to have LECs. However, in another sense it is not easy, in that it would be necessary to decide on the design of appropriate, inclusive, local agencies to drive economic development. This would be an interesting discussion for rural Scotland, which could lead to the creation of different kinds of local institution for different areas. More difficult issues are provided by the superintending agencies, Highlands and Islands Enterprise and Scottish Enterprise, neither of which was designed to be inclusive.

Rural local authorities do not share the first of the LEC problems. The fact that councils are elected means that they are much more capable of being inclusive. Nevertheless, there is a strong case for examining the actual

Scottish Affairs

practices of local government, some of which originate in times when local government was considered, rather narrowly, to be the business of the professional expert. Local Agenda 21 provides a powerful device for encouraging local authorities to facilitate citizen involvement and participation across the range of policies for sustainability.

The act of examining the 'inclusiveness' of Scottish institutions and policies, is likely, in itself, to lead to a less centralised approach to public policy. Scotland, before the arrival of the Parliament, was one of the most centrally controlled polities in Europe. The new politics and the new approaches to policy create opportunities for rural Scotland to question inappropriate centralisation, whether it is found in the highly normative National Planning Policy Guidelines of the Development Department, or the very tight controls over education policy and management. Equally inappropriate centralisation by local authorities, by non-elected, or by publicly funded, voluntary agencies may also be called into question.

Within the general concern for 'social inclusion' there are particular priorities. There is a general, over-arching concern to make policy-making more open and transparent, and to broaden out participation. The Parliament, or at least two of the four main political parties, set out to secure a 'gender balance', and with some success (Brown 1999). The Parliament is seeking to adopt ways of working which are 'child and family friendly'. It is to be expected that all public and publicly funded institutions will be assessed in these terms, as well as on the effectiveness with which they discharge their policy remits. There is an opportunity also to consider the impact on rural Scotland of every institution which is in receipt of public funding, from the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations to the Higher Education Institutions. And the Parliament's Rural Affairs Committee could be the focus for these discussions.

As far as the policies and institutions which are primarily focused on rural Scotland are concerned, we might expect that future evaluations will include rural communities in the processes of evaluation, or even empower them to carry out community evaluations.

CONCLUSIONS

The creation of the Parliament marks the beginnings of a new phase in Scottish politics and public life. This new phase is intended to be different from what has gone before, and in particular to be more open and inclusive.

This broad intention to reshape politics, together with the creation of a Committee system, and a Rural Affairs Committee, present a historically new

Opportunities for Rural Scotland?

set of opportunities to rural Scotland. These include: the ability to engage with the Parliament to secure better policies for rural development; the ability to influence the priorities of the Parliament and its committees; the ability to play a greater role in the governance of Scotland; and, the ability to secure stronger and more appropriate institutions, in particular through the devolving of additional responsibilities to local government. However, this new situation also throws up an enormous challenge to rural Scotland, namely how to equip itself so that it is able to deal effectively with the Parliament, so that these opportunities may be pursued.

REFERENCES

- Agriculture Select Committee of the House of Commons 1999 **Second Report - The European Commission's Proposals for a Rural Development Regulation**, HC 61, London: The Stationery Office
- Blunden J R, Pryce W T R and Dreyer P 1998 The Classification of Rural Areas in the European Context: An Exploration of a Typology Using Neural Network Applications, **Regional Studies**, Vol 32 No 2, April
- Braudel F 1985 **Civilisation and Capitalism 15th-18th Century, (Volume 1) The Structures of Everyday Life**, London: Fontana Press
- Brown A 1999 Taking their Place in the New House: Women and the Scottish Parliament, **Scottish Affairs**, No 28
- Brown A, McCrone D, Paterson L and Surridge P 1998 **The Scottish Electorate; the 1997 General Election and Beyond**, London: McMillan
- Chisholm W 1998 Highland 'Enjoys Funding Bias', **The Scotsman**, 17th February, p10
- Commins P 1993 Rural Development in the Republic of Ireland in Murray M and Greer J (eds) 1993 **Rural Development in Ireland**, Aldershot: Avebury
- COSLA 1998 **Reform of the Common Agricultural Policy - Response**, Edinburgh: Convention of Scottish Local Authorities
- COSLA and SLGIU 1999 **The Directory of Scottish Local Government**, Edinburgh: Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, and Scottish Local Government Information Unit, July
- Cross M and Nutley S 1999 Insularity and Accessibility: the Small Island Communities of Western Ireland, **Journal of Rural Studies**, Vol 15, N0 3, July
- Danson M, Fairley J, Lloyd M G, and Turok I, 1999 The European Structural Fund Partnerships in Scotland: New Forms of Governance for Regional Developments?, **Scottish Affairs**, No 27
- Dewdney R 1997 Results of Devolution Referendums (1979 and 1997), Research Paper no 97/113, London: House of Commons Library, 10 November

Scottish Affairs

- Devine T M 1995 **Exploring the Scottish Past; Themes in the History of Scottish Society**, East Linton: the Tuckwell Press
- Fairley J 1998 Local Authority Education in a Democratic Scotland, **Scottish Educational Review**, September
- Giddens A 1999 **Runaway World - How Globalisation is Reshaping our Lives**, London: Profile Books
- Greer J and Murray M 1993 Rural Ireland - Personality and Policy Context, in Murray M and Greer J (eds) **Rural Development in Ireland**, Aldershot: Avebury
- Himsworth C M G and Munro C R **Devolution and the Scotland Bill**, Edinburgh: W Green and Son
- Hughes G 1995 Agri-Environmental Policy and the Rural Economy, **Contemporary Wales** Vol 8, Cardiff: University of Wales Press
- Hunter J 1999 **Last of the Free - A Millennial History of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland**, Edinburgh: Mainstream
- Hunter J 1999b People are Key to Reform, **The Herald**, July 15th, p11
- Mackay Consultants 1996 **Services in Rural Scotland**, Edinburgh: The Scottish Office Central Research Unit
- Mackay D 1995 **Scotland's Rural Land Use Agencies; The History and Effectiveness in Scotland of the Forestry Commission, Nature Conservancy Council, and Countryside Commission**, Aberdeen: Scottish Cultural Press
- McIntosh N 1999 **Report of the Commission on Local Government and the Scottish Parliament** (The McIntosh Commission), Edinburgh
- McQuaid R 1999 The Local Economic Impact of the Scottish Parliament in McCarthy J and Newlands D (eds) **Governing Scotland: Problems and Prospects; the Economic Implications of the Scottish Parliament**, Aldershot: Ashgate
- Midmore P 1999 Rural Economic Development: A research Agenda for the National Assembly of Wales, **Contemporary Wales**, Vol 11, Cardiff: University of Wales Press
- Midmore P, Hughes G and Bateman D 1994 Agriculture and the Rural Economy: Problems, Policies and Prospects, **Contemporary Wales**, Vol 6, Cardiff: University of Wales Press
- Murray M and Greer J 1993 Rural Development in Northern Ireland in Murray M and Greer J (eds) **Rural Development in Ireland**, Aldershot: Avebury
- Pattie C et al 1998 The 1997 Scottish Referendum: an Analysis of the Results, **Scottish Affairs**, No 22, Winter
- Raven H 1999 Land Reform in McDowell E and McCormick J (eds) **Environment Scotland: Prospects for Sustainability**, Aldershot: Ashgate

Opportunities for Rural Scotland?

- Ray C 1999 Endogenous Development in the Era of Reflexive Modernity, **Journal of Rural Studies**, Vol 15 No 3, July
- Rennie F 1996 **Rural Issues**, Workshop Paper at A Scottish Parliament: Friend or Foe to Local Government? Conference, Crieff, 15-16 February
- Rhodes R 1997 **Understanding Governance; Policy Networks, Governance, Reflexivity and Accountability**, Buckingham: Open University Press
- SCC 1995 **Scotland's Parliament, Scotland's Right**, Edinburgh: Scottish Constitutional Convention
- Scottish Affairs Committee 1995, **The Operation of the Enterprise Agencies and the LECs**, HC 339, London: The Stationery Office
- Scottish Affairs Committee 1998 **The Operation of Multi-Layer Democracy**, Vol I, HC 460-I, London: The Stationery Office
- Scottish Executive 1999 **Report of the Commission on Local Government and the Scottish Parliament - The Scottish Executive's Response**, Edinburgh: The Scottish Executive, September
- Scottish Executive 199b **Land Reform - Proposals for Legislation**, Edinburgh: the Stationery Office
- Scottish Office 1997a **Scotland's Parliament**, Cm3658, Edinburgh: the Scottish Office
- Scottish Office 1997b **Towards a Development Strategy for Rural Scotland, A Discussion Paper**, Edinburgh: the Scottish Office
- Scottish Parliament 1999 **What's Happening in the Scottish Parliament?**, Issue No 8, 3 July, Edinburgh: the Scottish Parliament Information Centre
- Scottish Office 1999b National Planning Policy Guideline 15 **Rural Development**, Edinburgh: Scottish Office Development Department
- Scottish Office 1999c **Changed Days - Local Agenda 21 in Scotland**, Edinburgh: The Scottish Office
- SOEID 1997, **Scottish Education Statistics**, Annual Review 1997, Edinburgh: Scottish Office Education and Industry Department, September
- Smout J C 1994 Patterns of Culture in Dickson A and Treble J H (eds) **People and Society in Scotland Vol III, 1914-1990**, Edinburgh: John Donald
- UK Government, 1999 **Devolution: Memorandum of Understanding and Supplementary Agreements between the UK Government, Scottish Ministers and the Cabinet of the National Assembly for Wales**, Cm4444, London: The Stationery Office
- Wightman A 1999 **Scotland: Land and Power, the agenda for land reform**, Edinburgh: Luath Press
- Young J 1999 **The Exclusive Society**, London: Sage

December 1999