

## **THE CULTURAL AND COMMERCIAL REPRESENTATION OF SCOTLAND IN EUROPE**

*Christopher Harvie*

### **I      RESERVED SUBJECTS: THE CRUMBLING WALL?**

'Interesting times', as in the old Chinese curse, confront the Labour party in Scotland. In late 2000 it looked as if it would consolidate its control of Scottish politics at the forthcoming Westminster elections, yet its reversal of fortune at the Falkirk by-election on 21 December makes their long-term implications for Scotland more difficult to call. The next Scottish Parliament elections are due, ineluctably, in May 2003, when there's likely to be a severe case of mid-term blues. So there is a good chance that the present Labour-Liberal Executive (or 'Government' since 9 January) will try to strengthen its position by stressing the 'process' aspect of devolution, in order to avoid losing power to the SNP, in coalition with the Liberals, Greens or Scottish Socialists. Should the trend of the Falkirk by-election and subsequent local contests continue, however, even this might not work: the SNP could be the largest single party in the parliament. If the oil price rises (though this isn't easy to predict: it could be lowered by a severe US recession), it will have an important weapon to hand. Even sections of a Lib-Lab Government may invoke greater autonomy against any attempt to reduce Scotland's financial entitlement under the Barnett formula, and also to force greater concessions on other subjects.

One central area of these will almost inevitably involve reassessing Scotland's links with British foreign representation, a 'reserved subject' in which the UK view is supposed to take cognisance of Scottish interests, but in practice has only done so in specific areas. The moralistic objections of the Scots élite to Nato and its 'weapons of mass destruction' have already been voiced. The

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Edinburgh government itself has indicated another area of friction. In December the Minister for Education, Jack McConnell, spoke of increasing Scotland's direct links with partner regions in Europe, notably North-Rhine Westphalia, in this way by-passing Whitehall (McConnell 2000). The SNP's policy has always been that of full nationhood, with the representation in the EU and UN that this entails. It has thought little about 'half-way' stages. The effort involved in setting up a network of embassies, consulates, etc, though emotionally attractive to some nationalists, has tended to be a 'more jobs for the boys' turn-off for the electorate. Yet there are ways in which the gradual development of autonomous representation could be presented as a strategy for economic gain, principally by concentrating on the sectors of the domestic economy that it can aid. In this way 'confederal' rather than 'federal' or 'union' institutions can be set up, ahead of serious negotiations about independence. One of those is bound to be a 'Shadow' External Affairs Ministry - something which McConnell's initiatives may even anticipate. There is already an international relations unit within the staff office of the National Assembly for Wales (Morgan 2001).

## **II RECENTRALISING BRITAIN?**

In their otherwise rather critical assessment of the first year of devolution, the Constitution Unit still found that 51% of those polled thought Holyrood was important for Scotland, against 31% who reposed their trust in Westminster (Hazell 2000, p. 221), a deterioration in the latter's position which was seen as intensifying. It was also apparent that Westminster MPs' activity, measured by questions to ministers, had fallen by over two thirds (Hazell 2000, p. 193). Yet, in Whitehall's handling of the 'reserved subjects' is there evidence of a counter movement, devised to cramp devolution's style?

This paper was provoked by personal experience of one exemplary conflict, not directly about devolution, yet with considerable implications for it: the cultural representation of the United Kingdom in Europe. As I played some part in orchestrating reaction to it, I have drawn on my own experience of the situation, which hasn't yet been resolved.

The subject at issue was the strategy of the British Council, traditionally the main institution of British cultural representation abroad. The Council, after a policy review which seemed unusually short on consultation (there are no policy documents on its website) decided to shift resources to the 'Accession States' and developing countries and cut its West European budgets by up to 50%, mainly by closing down regional offices and libraries, leaving only one office, in Berlin, for the whole of Germany (Williamson 2000). Leaving aside

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the fact that programmes for developing countries might be better carried as part of a contribution to an European effort, the resulting centralisation seemed to fly in the face of the regional movement in Europe of which Scotland is supposed to be a part (see British Council Germany Website), and seems to confirm Tom Nairn's model of New Labour trying to keep control, by authoritarian and secretive means, of a constitutional pluralism which it feels is getting out of hand (Nairn 2000).

The dismantling of the Council's European regional structure - undertaken with no formal parliamentary discussion of Council policy, though there was a worried Lords debate late in October 2000 - provides both an instance of the growing 'collapsibility' of public UK institutions, and an opportunity for developing Scotland's external presence. Like so many New Labour cultural policies it seems to have been based - in the shadow of the Greenwich Dome - on some highly speculative statistics and sketchy policy ideas (see British Council Website). The official line, that centralisation will allow for provincial relationships to be enhanced, seems to run against nearly three hundred years of experience within the Anglo-Scottish Union. Historically, centralisation provoked nationalist organisation in the 1850s, 1880s and 1940s, while administrative decentralisation - the concession of the Scottish Secretary in 1885, the physical removal of the Scottish Departments to Edinburgh in 1939, the Conservative build-up of the Scottish Office from 1957 to 1964 - bought off discontent for a remarkably long time (Harvie 1998).

Yet the crisis itself is a reaction to the 'break-up of Britain' scenario. In the words of the present Director of the British Council: Germany, Tony Andrews, on 9 November, describing British-German relations:

We are particularly concerned that things at present are not as healthy as they might be, mainly because of the existence on both sides (especially in the UK) of outdated stereotypes and prejudices. Our new strategy aims to address this, and our efforts will be directed as much at British perceptions, working closely with the German Embassy and the Goethe Institute in London, as the German perceptions. We have a number of high level projects which are aimed at young Germans and young British people, the objective of which is to create what I term a 'sea temperature change' in perceptions between the two countries. Everything the Council does in science, the arts, governance, information and English language will serve this aim.

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To achieve this 'sea temperature change' in the relationship the Council will need to work strategically with key partners in the UK and Germany. This will be a different approach to before and will require centrally managed resources which can be deployed quickly and effectively in order to lever-in substantial amounts of sponsorship and co-funding. (Andrews 2000)

'Sea temperature change' is not, perhaps, a fortunate phrase in the era of global warming, but the strong centralism of the policy was unapologetic. Cultural policy was to be a matter for Berlin and London, and for 'sponsorship and co-funding' whose environment is overwhelmingly metropolitan.

It would no longer involve partnership with German 'multipliers', mainly academics and local authorities, but 70% of funding would aim at projects directly appealing to a target group of 8 to 23-year-olds. How wise is such a policy, given increasing radical criticism of global-commercial 'crowding-out' of the public service ethos, in such telling critiques as Naomi Klein's **No Logo?** (Klein 2000). There has certainly been some support for the Council from the Goethe Institute, also anxious to rationalise in the European provinces (it will close its Manchester office), but the scheme met with overall rejection by British Council staff in Germany (unsurprisingly, since half to two-thirds of them would lose their jobs) and German academic partners, who regard the Council, and its 'multiplier' effect on local cultural life, as a supplement to their own efforts (**Independent** 2000; **Spiegel** 2001).

The trigger for the change in policy might be dead simple: after the catastrophe of the Dome, 'soft' cultural expenditure is an easy target for economies. But there has also been a fairly long-lived hostility to the Council within the Foreign Office. Some financial scandals in the early 1990s led to rumours that Malcolm Rifkind might axe it, and under Robin Cook its security seemed to lie in its willingness to back the government's 'Cool Britannia' line. Even when this was elsewhere being reined back, the rhetoric was still evident in a **Guardian** article by the Council's new Director-General, David Green, in mid-1998. The evolution of policy towards Germany seemed to have been influenced by a 1999 survey which showed German youth's attitudes to Britain as the most negative in Western Europe (see British Council Website). It's quite evident, from interviews with German academics and students, that the situation provoking the policy change is English, and south-east English at that, rather than British. German students and visitors in Scotland and Wales increasingly make the comparison between the good reception that they get, and a Southern English opinion poisoned by the right-wing tabloids, as the British Ambassador Sir

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Paul Lever claimed in 1998. The Scottish situation isn't ideal - Scots command of foreign languages is poor, and academic standards remain inferior to those on the continent - but such problems are altogether different from those of south-east Ukania: much more about turning well-meaning exchanges and twinning projects into mutually-beneficial regional cooperation in areas such as higher education, tourism and transport.

'Substantial amounts of sponsorship and co-funding' sounded even more ominous. In Germany, besides regionalisation, there's a long tradition of independent cultural foundations - the Bosch, Thyssen or Volkswagen Stiftungs - and the cultural bodies attached to the political parties such as the SPD's Ebert or CDU's Adenauer Stiftungs. Apart from a very few similar British bodies such as the Nuffield Foundation or the Joseph Rowntree Trust, the sponsorship that the British Council hopes for will come from private firms which want to see a market pay-off. This will also reinforce centralisation, while the 'privatisation' of national cultural representation, which it also implies, remains something attuned both to the commercial resources of the metropolis - the lobby groups and the huge public relations departments of publishers and the media (Crouch 2000). Their German operation - the Frankfurt Book Fair - is already vast, and the British Council isn't part of it. 'Do we need a British Council if we've got Harry Potter?' might work at the Groucho Club, but won't do Scots or Welsh cultural representation much good<sup>1</sup>. The low level of historical inclusivity demonstrated by such capital-rich metro-twaddle as Sir Roy Strong's **The Story of Britain** (1996) or Simon Schama's **History of Britain** (2000) for the BBC shows that there's little to be expected in this direction.

The centre-left great and good, such as Baroness Helena Kennedy, the new British Council Chair, from whom much radical thought was expected, apparently acquiesced in this (Kennedy 2000). Had they swallowed a Council line which seemed to have become, like the rest of New Labour, parasitic on the metropolitan media? English- or offshore-owned newspapers, as Graham Leicester's contribution to **State and Nation** pointed out, have relentlessly been pursuing their own neo-Unionist agenda in Scotland, with the 'baseball-bat' interventions on behalf of New Labour in the 1999 election by Trinity's

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<sup>1</sup> *It's worth discussing just what the 'Edinburgh single mum author' phenomenon - J.K. Rowling, Anne Fine, Philippa Gregory, Kate Atkinson - has brought to the local economy. Although Rowling's fortune is estimated at £30 million, not a lot, I'd guess, has come Edinburgh's way, in comparison with a sterling contribution to the PR and marketing legions of the metropolis.*

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**Daily Record** and the Mysterious Barclay Brothers' **Scotsman** (Hazell 2000, p. 35; Harvie 2000, pp. 12-13).

### **III BEYOND 'DREAMS AND GOALS'**

The 'Dreams and Goals' project, emblematic of the 'direct approach' to the 8 to 23 generation into which the British Council will divert such savings which remain after closing its offices, is deeply problematic (British Council 2001). Besides being predicated on the basis of neutralising the folk who gave us Lens and Charleroi, it has the immediate and distinct problem that the interest of the nations of 'These Islands' in the World Cup is only to a very limited extent to do with football. Attempts by Tony Banks and Jack Straw to propose an 'all-Britain' team have met with instantaneous rejection; the Scots are (alas, perhaps) basically concerned to see England shafted in the first round, preferably by San Marino. Thereafter one doesn't expect much enthusiasm per se for the over-rated 'beautiful game'. Matters will be even worse if Scotland doesn't qualify or goes out in round one. Behind this project, however, one can see a programme of sorts, and mightily depressing it is: a primitive level of collaboration, thoroughly acceptable no doubt to the movers and shakers of New Labour: the Ministry of Sound meets the Love Parade? History as a bad trip dissolves in the ambience of clubbing and happy pills? This prospect isn't utterly fanciful: James Palumbo and Matthew Freud bankrolled Peter Mandelson's transport in the 1997 election, and although Mandelson's now off the menu, Palumbo is being helpful on the Dome, and Freud is now cohabiting with Elizabeth Murdoch. 'Cool Britannia' was a dry-run, and embarrassing, but can a campaign for a user-friendly, exportable Britcult be far away?

The problem is that the British element of the product, in any fricative, intellectual sense, is already perceived in Europe as damningly inferior. 'That lot would be doing well if they could read **Hello!**', as one of the doomed British Council regional directors observed of a tranche of newly-arrived teaching assistants from British universities. 'Being among merry teenagers' was how one of my students described two terms at the University of Newcastle. Prof. Christian Civardi, Vice-President of Strasbourg University was even more forthright: drink, drugs and sex have made British exchange students 'more trouble than all the other exchange students put together'. This was despite the fact that British students on exchange have fallen by a factor of three since the 1980s. Britain has a problem with its students as well as with its notorious teenagers, fairly patent in the imbalance between the cash they spend on books (down from £515 to 378 annually) and the cash spent on booze and clubbing (up from £1320 to 1654) (**Guardian** 2000). German

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students (and, increasingly, graduates) get on well in Britain because they're older, better-trained, and better-motivated than their British counterparts, while frustrated by the constraints of a deeply conservative German academe. They are, in fact, a considerable resource for British regional development.

This raises another strategic issue important for Scotland. The high-value-added tourism and industry-attracting culture which the government wants to encourage involves concentrating on a mature, civic-minded and wealthy generation: the *ci-devant* radicals of 1968. Such a group (aged between 45 and 65) has perhaps amassed £250-£500,000 in family capital, and is contemplating an active retirement of 20-30 years. With its learning and civic commitment, it is a European resource. By contrast, 'yoof' hasn't much purchasing power: a disarming statistic in a *Locate in Scotland* brochure in 1995 described starting salaries in computer programming in Scotland, at £13,000, as 'erfreulich niedrig' (satisfyingly low) - inadequate to buy a house with or raise a family on (*Locate in Scotland* 1995). Hence the booze-and-clubbing life-style, the modest intellectual attainments, and the voicing of tabloid resentments: this sort of half-life is fodder for **Sun**-readership in a way unthinkable in Germany, where no student would be seen dead reading **Bild**.

Given the inevitable metropolitan command of private resources, the chief aim of public bodies such as the British Council ought to be to counter-balance this and give disproportionate backing to the non-commercial public culture and the provinces. Centralisation means that this is almost impossible unless there is a 'hard' policy decision to skew resources in favour of regional and minority representation, which might ensure that Scots, Welsh, Northern Irish and ethnic minority projects get between a third and a half the resources devoted to European representation.

#### **IV PROFILE OF A CAMPAIGN**

I deployed arguments of this sort in the weeks after 25 October. I wasn't alone in Germany - opposition was also voiced by groups of teachers and public figures in all the four cities concerned (Munich, Cologne, Leipzig and Hamburg) - but an article for the **Scotsman** coincided - quite by chance - with a meeting of the Council élite in Edinburgh early in November and caused quite a stir (Jones 2000). Contacts were made at three levels: with figures in the British government and the establishment of the British Council; with German political leaders in the affected Länder and their policy advisers (and the Bundespräsident Johannes Rau, who as well as being the former Land Minister-President of North Rhine-Westphalia, is a notable

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Anglophile with a wife who studied politics in Aberystwyth); and with the governments and opposition spokespeople on education and European affairs in Edinburgh and Cardiff.

Letters from the Foreign Office, Berlin Embassy and British Council were straightforward defences of the policy change. Considerable mutual briefing was evidently going on between the governments. The replies from the Bundespräsident were more guarded, echoing the critical position being taken by individual Länder, notably Bavaria (**Spiegel** 2001). While the responses of Scottish ministers, both directly and to written questions, were supportive of the government/British Council line, this was at odds with their press statements, which stressed their desire for more policy autonomy (McConnell 2000). From Rhodri Morgan, Welsh First Minister, came a detailed statement of Wales's autonomous approaches to Europe, and its development of bilateral relation with Baden-Württemberg, its German partner Land (Morgan 2001).

On 16 January the British Council Director: Germany Anthony Andrews came to Tübingen and tabled a new policy initiative, derived from his role as Director: Russia. This involved the creation of eight or so small 'Beacon' offices in the German Länder to replace the existing four offices. My response to this stressed the potential of upgrading these, through local consultation and involvement of the relevant regions and nations in Britain, into British Centres, while a further memo, on 'Dreams and Goals', stressed the difficulty - even the danger - of a sports-based exchange scheme without adequate local organisation. This was the position in mid-February, although rumours reported by British Council contacts suggested that the Foreign Office was hostile to the 'Beacons' scheme and would try to squash it. Fortsetzung folgt is the German for 'to be continued'...

## **V STRATEGIES FOR THE FUTURE**

These cultural politics had, by mid-February 2001, a grotesque echo in Scotland, where the intervention of Frank Roy, MP for Motherwell, threw a spanner in the works of a fast-developing bilateral relationship between the Scottish Parliament and the Government of Ireland. The Irish Prime Minister, Bertie Ahern, was prevented from inaugurating a memorial to the victims of the Great Hunger of the 1840s, erected at Carfin Grotto. Behind Roy's inept intervention seemed to lie the concern of the Secretary of State Helen Liddell, to whom he was Parliamentary Private Secretary, that such relationships should not be allowed to get out of the control of Whitehall.

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Scotland's overseas cultural policy and representation is of crucial economic importance. On it depends not only the development of high-value-added tourism (part of a £2 billion industry that stagnated in 2000 and may have, because of foot and mouth, nosedived since: a matter of concern since this income is practically matched by Scots tourist expenditure overseas), but the cultural resources that incoming firms increasingly require. As such, in the context of national development, it is both a priority area and one which, with careful organisation, can be substantially self-sustaining. As youth hasn't financial resources, the British Council's policy of catering for it directly is not of first-order importance for the Scottish economy. There is much more to be gained by building up the experience through 'seed-funding' of organisations and exchanges of the people who have to deal with and positively influence youth: social workers, teachers, sports organisations and, not least, the police.

Although Jack McConnell had made links with North Rhine Westphalia a priority, in late 2000 he was still holding to the British Council line (Williamson 2000). He should, however, be able to build on the 'Beacon' concept, if he's allowed to. As planned, the 'Beacons' would be situated in existing buildings belonging to partners, staffed and provided with limited reference material, and equipped with an entrance portal to the Web. About £400,000 was budgeted for to set the network up, and about £320,000 in annual running costs (Andrews 2001). But, boosted by Scottish Government funding, one or two of the Beacons – Cologne and Munich, for instance? - could become, in the first instance, the means of assembling information on existing and potential exchange and representation facilities, ranging from local pipe bands (there is one in Böblingen, which is twinned with Glenrothes) to publishers with Scottish interests, travel agents, translators, tours by Scottish poets or folk groups. Secondly, they could act as a way for Scots students of German to increase their competence and experience in teaching abroad. Finally, they could cooperate in setting up and publicising joint events with Scots-oriented local groups.

Where would the British Council's new departure fit into a future Scottish Government which might be SNP-led? If there's no progress on the Beacons, such a government might seek to replace the Council's centralised structure with a series of bilateral agreements with Scotland's most important partner-states and regions, under-written by two things:

(1) direct co-operation agreements with and between bodies such as 'twinned' municipalities and regional governments, and higher education institutes specialising in Scottish studies;

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and

(2) the encouragement by subsidy and organisational assistance of voluntary touristic-cultural organisations along the lines pioneered by the Irish in such organisations as the Deutsch-Irische Freundeskreise and the Irland-Journal, not to speak of Dublin's enlightened policy of opening Irish consulates in Edinburgh and Cardiff.

As a preliminary measure, an embryo Scottish Council could be created to establish a register of potentially cooperating agencies and individuals, in the first instance concentrating on links within the European Union. In due course an informal network of literary/academic contacts could be built up, cemented by journals, book clubs, interactive web networks, and so on. The costs of these are not high. The Welsh Studies Centre at Tübingen University provides a Kompaktseminar on an annual budget of DM 7000 (£2000+). The willingness of European academics to participate will be considerable, in the light of their unfortunate experience with the British Council. Such a policy will self-evidently appeal to an SNP-led régime contemplating the loosening of British links. Yet the present Executive could also negotiate on an autonomous Scottish commercial-cultural division being created within strategic British embassies, consulates and British Council offices (where these survive). The monies currently flowing from Scotland on a pro-rata basis to the British Council could progressively be diverted to setting up this network. Negotiations would start to create a co-operative strategy, where common interests exist and can be expanded, with the Welsh and Northern Irish Executives and the Irish Government, either inside or parallel to the Council of the Islands.

In the late 19th century the causes of friction which ultimately led to the separation of Norway and Sweden were, above all, concentrated on the inability of the Swedish diplomatic service to cater for the needs of Norway's substantial merchant marine. Tourism and education have a similar salience in today's Scotland, and the divergence from UK priorities which this underlines means that this should assume a high place in future Scottish policy planning.

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