

## **REVIEW: THE STATE AND THE NATIONS**

*Paul Henderson Scott*

Robert Hazell (ed.) (2000) **The State and the Nations: The First Year of Devolution in the United Kingdom**, London: Imprint Academic, ISBN 0907845800, pb, £14.95, pp.304.

In mid-December 2000 both **The Herald** and **The Scotsman** published prominently two separate reviews of this book by John Reid, then Secretary of State for Scotland. He was pleased with it, as 'a balanced and intelligent overview of the devolutionary process'. This is an opinion with which I agree, but Reid then proceeded to give the impression that the book was an enthusiastic endorsement of Labour policies and practice. He quoted only one sentence: 'It is an extraordinary achievement - to transform a highly centralised unitary state into a devolved and quasi-federal system of government in the space of only three years.' This sentence does occur, in Robert Hazell's Introduction on page 3; but the rest of the book is highly critical of Labour's performance on all levels. Perhaps Reid thought that he did not need to read beyond the Introduction because, as he said in one of the reviews, he is an insider who knows it all already. Alternatively, he was deliberately misrepresenting the general thrust of the book.

As Hazell says in the Foreword, the book is a team effort, the first fruit of a five-year research programme, funded by the Leverhulme Trust. There are teams of experts in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and chapters on each by these teams, headed by Graham Leicester for Scotland, John Osmond for Wales and Robin Wilson and Rick Wilford for Northern Ireland. John Tomaney contributes chapters on London and the English regions. Robert Hazell and Meg Russell have two chapters on intergovernmental relations and 'tentative steps towards a more federal parliament' and John Curtice one on the public reaction.

Graham Leicester's chapter on Scotland is admirably lucid and comprehensive. Unlike John Reid, he does not assume that Devolution is a

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final settlement, but might move in either direction. Even if most Scots decide in the event that they do not want to leave the UK, he says, 'they may well demand that the Parliament is made more powerful ... The degree to which this happens may be the real focus of the constitutional debate in future years.' He thinks that at the end of the first year the new system was settling down, but he sees two reasons for concern. The first is what he calls 'the corrosive small-mindedness of the Scottish press and Scottish politics'. Well, we all know what he means by that, although I think that there has been some improvement. His second reason is much more damning:

The second feature is the general and palpable frustration of many of the principal actors in the system - a sense that the system is consuming so much of their waking lives for so little visible result. The system is 'running on the spot'. That frustration is felt by ministers who cannot force through innovations and who blame their civil servants; by civil servants who cannot find any coherence in fragmented ministerial policy driven by press releases, glossy initiatives, and set piece speeches; by the Parliament's committees either tied down with government legislation or else daunted by the scope of their remit and with an inability to prioritise; by individual MSPs living an itinerant lifestyle based more around the demands of local newspapers and the constituency mail than the vision they hold of a better Scotland.

This is a grim description of what John Reid in his reviews called 'one of the finest achievements' of the Labour Government. We can only hope that Leicester exaggerates. He is uncertain about the future. Either disillusionment may grow and people begin to feel 'that perhaps the Parliament was, after all, the wrong institution at the wrong time'. Alternatively, there might be a fresh start and the Executive (or do we now call it the Government?) could improve its ways and begin to 'focus on delivery rather than on glossy consultation documents'. Leicester admits, and the analysis of poll evidence by John Curtice agrees, that there is no sign that public opinion is turning against the existence of the Parliament. Discontent with the performance of the Labour administration increased from 21% in June 1999 to 57% in June 2000; but the desire that the Parliament should have increased powers also grew to 62% in April 2000.

Also in Wales there is a public wish for increased powers. The main point which emerges from John Osmond's chapter is that the Welsh Assembly is widely seen as a 'Constitutional Convention by other means' and a step towards a parliament on the Scottish model. Contrary to many predictions, it seems that in Scotland and Wales public opinion is perfectly capable of

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distinguishing between the performance of an administration and the virtues of the institution. After all, discontent with a Government at Westminster does not normally lead to suggestions that the Parliament itself should be abolished.

Robert Hazell in his chapter on 'International Relations: Whitehall Rules OK?' investigates an area which is seldom reported and which remains mysterious, 'the machinery established in Whitehall to handle relations with the devolved government post-devolution'. He describes it as low key and gradualist. The similar office in Ottawa has a staff of 150, but the Cabinet office in London has only about a dozen dealing with these questions. Hazell's conclusion is that 'this pragmatic and gradualist approach has worked' and that intergovernmental relations 'have got off to a gentle and remarkably smooth start'. This, too, is one of the points made by John Reid in his reviews: 'There have been no major rows ... no walk-outs, no pistols at dawn'. Here, of course, both Hazell and Reid are thinking mainly of relations with Scotland. Wales and London have had their crises over Blair's attempts to impose his nominees. Northern Ireland is a very different case where the main problem is internal. In any case, both Hazell and Reid were writing before McLeish ran into problems with his wish to call his administration a Government (which it is, after all) and to implement the recommendations of the Sutherland Report.

There is no great mystery about the comparatively smooth relationship between Edinburgh and Westminster in the first year or so of the new arrangement. Labour is the dominant party at both levels, in spite of the coalition in Edinburgh, and it is a Labour Party which now has particularly strong internal discipline. It is so strong in fact that the Party management in London has been slow to learn that it is no longer dealing with a unified and centralized state. The civil service at both levels is still a UK service and old habits die hard. Also, the legislation, and the machinery which Hazell describes, are designed to try to ensure that Whitehall is in charge.

Still, one is left with the impression that relations between Westminster and the new levels of government are more a classic case of faith in muddling through than of deliberate planning. Robert Hazell in his final chapter reaches a very similar conclusion. He quotes the American professor Alan Ward who has described the incoherence between the arrangements made for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, where there is no common pattern: 'constitutional incoherence severely contributes to the democratic deficit in the UK'. Hazell argues that devolution will have 'a profound impact on all the institutions of the British state', but that there is an 'absence of any strong sense of vision in the government of how the centre needs to change'.

This book is impressive in its thorough and intelligent account of the state of the new devolved administrations; but it is more than that. It is a very clear demonstration that we have not reached a settlement, but are only at the beginning of a process of unpredictable, but probably now unstoppable, constitutional change.

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