

REVIEW: NEW SCOTLAND, NEW POLITICS?

James Kellas

Lindsay Paterson, Alice Brown, John Curtice, Kerstin Hinds, David McCrone, Alison Park, Kerry Sproston and Paula Surridge, **New Scotland, New Politics?**, Edinburgh, Polygon at Edinburgh 2001, pb, £14.99, ISBN 1 902930 25 8, pp xi + 195.

Eight authors for one slim volume! What brought them together? The answer is of course a big research grant, in this case the ESRC-funded Scottish Parliamentary Election Survey, which concerns the first Scottish Parliament Election in May 1999. Many other surveys are used here, starting with the Scottish Election Survey of 1979. There is now a successor survey to that of 1999, the first Scottish Social Attitudes Survey (2000), published in June 2001, and of course we now know how people voted in the British general election of June 2001. So in some ways we are actually wiser than the authors when they wrote this book, since we have information now that they did not have.

Does that make a difference? Yes, because social science research based on surveys is always faced with big problems. Surveys can tap the mood of the moment (the hackneyed 'snapshot'), but not necessarily truthfully, if we compare the results of the surveys before the 2001 election with the actual results.¹ Predictions of voting are of course somewhat different from attitude surveys, but the problems remain. What is the difference between survey

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¹ *Malcolm Dickson, 'Hindsight gives clear view of muddled picture from the polls', Herald, 7 June 2001. Dickson shows that 'the polls have been more erratic' than in 1997, and 'they disagreed fundamentally on the extent' of the Labour victory. Variations between the polls on the methodology adopted are now leading 'down a very rocky road.'*

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responses and political behaviour? How do we know that what people say to survey researchers is what they actually believe? What will people say tomorrow, next week, next month, next year, when the context has changed?

Survey research is big business, and the authors indulge in some heavy plugging for their work and the chances of getting another grant ('the new survey series opens up the opportunity, if funding allows...' (p.4); 'the only way to understand what is happening is by means of regular national surveys of the kind we have been reporting.' (p.167)). Well, they would say that, wouldn't they? Their problem is that after the current wave of interest in devolution has died down, the big devolution and national identity research programmes will probably die with it. Then it will be up to the Scottish Parliament to fund the research, from the limited funds at its disposal. No longer will the London-based funders be so interested in Scotland.

However, these insider considerations are not really the point here. The question is, how can we understand the 'New Scotland, New Politics?'. Are we any the wiser after following the survey approach, and is there any alternative route to studying Scottish (or any other) politics?

Let me say right away that I am 100% (to be appropriately quantitative) behind survey research, and that the alternative is a lot of unfounded speculation. We now have a much better idea of national identity, values, political attitudes and political behaviour than we had before. We can tackle big questions such as the difference between Scotland and England, looking at political culture, the nature of Scottish nationalism, the support for 'New Labour' as opposed to 'Old' in Scotland, the support for Scottish independence, etc. This book is a very good example of how sophisticated social research can come up with answers on these. This review cannot possibly go into the detailed results, which are discussed at specialist conferences.

What can be said here is that the authors are remarkably cautious about many of the important questions we would like to have answers to. For example, Scots are clearly different in voting behaviour (looking obviously at the SNP and the very weak Conservative Party), but apparently similar in attitudes and political culture. Here the subsequent 2000 Scottish Social Attitudes

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Survey seems to differ in its results from the surveys here.¹ Scots are indeed different from others in many key political attitudes, if we believe the 2000 survey.

Another area of contest is the significance of national identity. Scots are apparently more 'Scottish' than British, and have become more Scottish in recent years. Yet the SNP and support for independence have not clearly benefited from this, and even voting for devolution in the 1997 referendum has been disconnected (according to most of these experts) from the strength of Scottish identity. For this reviewer this does not make sense.

And what of the prospects for independence from all this research? Sorry, anything can happen. Yet 'everything is changing, nothing can be taken for granted' (p.167). Ah well, I could have told them that.

There is an alternative, or complementary, way to study (Scottish) politics. That is the institutional approach. It cannot be studied through surveys of the electorate. Known in the trade as the 'New Institutionalism' it means for Scotland looking at the devolved institutions and the behaviour of the politicians, civil servants and other actors in them. If we do that the question-mark in the title of this book disappears. This *is* 'New Scotland, New Politics'. And if independence comes, it will be as a result of the relationship between the devolved bodies and the centre. Of course, the voters in Scotland will have to put it in train by their party (SNP?) votes and the ensuing referendum on independence. But to have a full understanding of Scottish politics we need that alternative focus, which no doubt can be analysed without the aid of the large research grants needed for survey research. In the meantime, we can learn a lot from surveys, and in particular this important book.

July 2001

¹ John Curtice, 'The Sunday Essay; Devolution's Second Birthday', **Scotland on Sunday**, 24 June 2001.