

REVIEW: SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT AND POLITICS

Lucy McTernan

Peter Lynch (2001), **Scottish Government and Politics: An Introduction**,
Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, pb, £14.95, ISBN 0 7486 1287
4, 238pp.

As an early – pre-2001 General Election – reader of Peter Lynch's new text book of Scottish Politics, it was the reference in the introductory chapter to 'the first Blair administration' that initially brought home the nature of his achievement. This phrase did not jar after 7 June, but it does highlight the challenge that Lynch set himself: to capture a tumultuous, continuing, process of political change in readable and educative form, while at the same time building in a reasonably durable shelf-life. In large part I think he has achieved the task, and many students, and indeed devolution ingénues more generally, will be grateful for it.

The most pleasing thing about the general approach to the book was the explicit acknowledgement that a political system is about more than institutions and formal systems. Of course the great aspiration for the new Scotland is to bring politics closer to the people, but nevertheless the temptation often is to focus solely on the – still new - parliamentary systems and institutional relationships. Lynch pays welcome attention to those of us who are on the outside of these formal systems, but still very much involved in the new politics of Scotland.

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The voluntary sector, trades unions, and other civic bodies, are all dealt with, largely descriptively and through case studies, in a chapter entitled 'Pressure Group Scotland'. This tag feels unsatisfactory, almost belittling the role of the very wide array of organisations it apparently encompasses, a discomfort the author perhaps shares, given the definitional preamble to this chapter. He summarises the analyses of other political writers of recent years, but recognises that Scottish devolution has brought about new circumstances: 'there have been few studies of pressure group activity in Scotland ... devolution is likely to push the activities of a large number of pressure groups into the public sphere, particularly given the intention to facilitate pressure group involvement in policymaking'; and therefore a need for fresh study?

The role of the media is also highlighted, though the reader of this chapter is left slightly muddled – perhaps reflecting the very ambivalent nature of the Scottish Press and the UK-Scotland tensions of broadcast it describes. There are useful 'potted histories' of the twists and turns of Scottish newspapers' political allegiances, and an emphasis on the important political role of the otherwise often overlooked local Press, along with an illustrative case study of the Scottish Six debacle. A clearer overall analytical framework, however, might have been helpful.

As you would expect, a sizeable portion of this text is an explanation of the operations of the new Scottish Parliament, its committee system and legislative process. This, however, is lifted by an almost 'story-telling' approach, illustrating technical points with accessible accounts of political events such as Mike Watson's resort to outside assistance in drafting his anti-hunting bill in the face of a shortage of parliamentary staff, or an SNP walk-out from the Social Inclusion, Housing and Voluntary Sector Committee pre-figuring the first minority report from a committee.

Lynch also covers the key relationships with UK structures, via and despite the Scottish Secretary and the UK Parliament, which are still such an unsettled feature of the new political reality in Scotland. He concludes that this is an area where there is still much uncertainty – 'all of these Westminster institutions have been in a post-devolution transition but, with the exception of the Scottish Affairs Select Committee, their destination is unknown' – and goes on to make the salutary point that 'of course, institutions that appear somewhat unnecessary now may appear necessary in the future. The Secretary of State's role in checking Scottish Parliament bills is

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politically redundant under the current Scottish Executive, but would not remain so were an SNP administration running the Scottish Executive'.

Similarly, questions are left hanging in the section on local government – this too is seen as an unfinished story. The potential for substantial reform of local government, including the fundamental political implications of any changes to the electoral system, are rightly flagged up.

The European dimension to the new Scotland is also properly addressed in his broad discussion of 'multi-level governance'. He points out that inter-relationships between the different levels of governance are driven through the government/executive route, effectively excluding the parliaments. His conclusion that this is an area 'in which open, accessible government has fallen short' gives pause for thought.

The book often shows real insight into the 'real life' of Scottish government and politics, focusing in the early section on the Executive, for instance, on the dilemmas facing civil service personnel. For years protected from the public gaze, and at the same time facing major upheaval in their place of work, career civil servants have been exposed to the scrutiny of an eager parliament, press and civic society as never before. It is in this rather gossipy context, but also more seriously because of their organisational and changing role in policy development, that the rather cursory treatment of the political parties (just a page or so each) was a disappointment.

An unfortunate technical aspect of this otherwise high-quality publication are the tables included to support the text. The problem is that in several cases they do not – and it is not clear whether this is because they were not always thought through or simply due to poor proof-reading. Likewise, the structure of the book seemed to have little rationale – dotting around from one theme to the next. Of course this latter is not a critical problem, given that any textbook is read by way of 'dipping-in' rather than from beginning to end. Maybe these are just symptoms of the necessarily short production timescale?

Scottish Government and Politics – An Introduction is, as its straightforward title would suggest, a comprehensive survey of the recent and current Scottish political scene which is accessible, and in parts genuinely entertaining. Not least because, for those of us who live in Scotland, it is a book about ourselves; in the same way as the familiar location of a dead body in an Ian Rankin novel adds to the enjoyment of the story, the recognition

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factor plays a great part. That in itself is telling – clearly the story Peter Lynch has laid out in his book is a true reflection of the recent Scottish political experience.

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