

REVIEW: OPEN SCOTLAND?

Brian Taylor

Philip Schlesinger, David Miller and William Dinan, 2001, **Open Scotland? Journalists, Spin Doctors and Lobbyists**, ISBN 1902930282, pb, £14.99, Polygon at Edinburgh, 312pp

Most Ministers of my acquaintance spend much of their time in an honourable lather of indecision. They fret privately about the consequences of their announcements, their expenditure choices. They worry about the wording. They agonise over the time-scale for implementation.

However, when they address Parliament - and, still more, when they speak to the media - they must sound utterly certain. They dismiss political opposition as ill-motivated chaff. They dismiss media questions as insubstantial piffle. They alone are right.

Part of the problem lies with partisan politics, its instinctively yah-boo nature. Part lies with personal pride among politicians. However, part - I am increasingly convinced - lies with a media system which is intolerant of honest debate, which equates assessing the facts with vacillation, which describes every factual dispute as an internal split, which demands a simplistic 'Yes or No' answer to every question.

Is it any wonder the voters are disenchanted with partisan politics? People, I am convinced, remain interested in the decisions taken on their behalf about education, health and the rest. They sense, however, that politicians are offering insincere dogma and valueless inter-party bickering. They sense, further, that much media coverage of rows and rhetoric is overblown and of little consequence.

The political system cannot change the electorate - however intellectually appealing such a concept might occasionally appear to a frustrated politician.

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So the body politic - politicians, Parliamentary debate and the attendant media - must heal itself.

Much has been written about the flaws in partisan politics: would PR improve matters, should confrontational debate be superseded by a more consensual approach, is the party system being sidelined by a new system of participative democracy involving, among other elements, direct protest action? Much less has been contributed about the flaws in the media approach to contemporary politics. We have Sir David Steel's uncharacteristically harsh denunciation of 'bitch journalism'. We have Tony Blair's speech to the Scottish Parliament in which he complained of the 'corrosive cynicism' demonstrated by much of the media. Now we have - in **Open Scotland** - a comprehensive, intelligent and acutely observant analysis of the Scottish media/political web. Indeed, at times, for those of us supposedly on the inside track, it is almost painfully observant.

Schlesinger, Miller and Dinan trace the relationships between journalists, spin doctors, lobbyists and politicians. They pinpoint the small-country interconnections which, they argue, can tend to work against healthy, detached reporting. They note the 'self-identity' of the Scottish political press corps, its tendency to view itself as somehow superior, less credulous than the Westminster version. They shine a spotlight upon an area which, for me, is foreign territory: the activity of lobbyists. Finally, they conclude that they were 'sobered' by their analysis of how much the eventual reality has departed from 'the rhetoric of new politics and an open Scotland' which, they confess, they had taken seriously.

Here, then, is a confession from me. I observed the notion of a new, consensual politics as occasionally evinced on the margins of the Constitutional Convention and the Consultative Steering Group (which drafted the rules for the new Parliament). I thought this notion was piffle - and dangerous piffle at that. Yes, the Chamber and the Parliamentary committees should attempt to be different, should strive to avoid the ludicrous ranting and posturing which often masquerades as debate at Westminster. However, contrived consensus mocks us all. Further, if this consensual construct is the over-riding objective, it can tend to suppress the argumentative debate which is the core of democracy. If the parties are all predisposed to strike a comfortable deal, what place the people?

Fine sentiments, I thought - and I still adhere to them. Mostly. Yet I confess - this appears to be a peak period for confession - that there are doubts which I

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cannot suppress. Doubts which Schlesinger et al have tended to enhance. Firstly, as a caveat, it is important to consider that self-regard which the book identifies in the press. I do not quite subscribe to the view that the relationship between the media and politics should resemble that between the dog and the lamp-post. Most journalists, however, are congenitally disposed to regard politicians with suspicion. The feeling is reciprocated. This is healthy and good.

Is there, though, a 'corrosive cynicism' in the press - as Blair argued and as a few journalists, notably in the **New Statesman**, are beginning to suspect? If there is, is it possible to correct this in the interests of open democracy without becoming in any way subservient? Is it possible that the dog may, once in a while, concede that the lamp-post has a point when it protests at the unremitting stream of criticism?

These thoughts, I should stress, largely go beyond the ambit of **Open Scotland**. It is more concerned with a close analysis of the structural flaws in the media/politics web. Perhaps its greatest value is the immensely detailed, factual description of the interlinking worlds of the media, the lobbyists and the spin doctors. Even those who count themselves as insiders will learn from perusal. I would hope, however, that **Open Scotland** may contribute to a wider - and much-needed - debate about the impact of the relationship between politics and the media. Given the turnout in the 2001 General Election, nothing is more pressing than an examination of any elements which may be contributing to voter disenchantment.

As a journalist who spends much of his working week in or around the Scottish Parliament, I would dissent a little from the authors' analysis of the Holyrood media pack. They indicate their belief that the 'clubby and secretive ambience' of the Lobby at Westminster has been replicated, at least in part, at the Scottish Parliament. I do not believe that is entirely true. I worked in the Westminster Lobby for a newspaper group in the early 1980s. I now cover Scottish politics for the BBC. The two milieus are not remotely comparable.

Firstly, Westminster itself has changed. The broadcasting of Parliament, the predominant role of television and radio in reflecting politics, have transformed the situation. I well recall the earlier generation of newspaper political editors who resisted television access - and defended the Westminster Lobby - because it provided a culture of privileged secrecy which enhanced their own status as sole keepers of the flame of 'truth'. Serious Westminster politics today takes place as much if not more in 4

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Millbank - the base for the broadcasters - as in Members' Lobby or Annie's Bar. The Lobby briefings themselves are now on the record - indeed, on the web - although, depressingly, they are still not on camera.

Secondly, Holyrood is genuinely different. Throughout the discussions which preceded the establishment of the Parliament, the **Oban Times** became an eikon for openness. It was repeatedly stressed that all proceedings - including Executive and Parliamentary briefings - must be available to that estimable local newspaper on exactly the same basis as to the permanent political staff of a tabloid daily or the BBC. To be fair to Schlesinger et al, I am not sure whether the **Oban Times** have availed themselves of this opportunity. The authors note, reasonably accurately, that it still tends to be a 'political media pack' on the Mound. However, the opportunity is distinctly there. There would be no bureaucratic hurdles. There would be no frowning faces. Just as there has been no difficulty when journalists from outside the field of politics - from other specialisations, for example, or from weekly magazines - have sought and gained access to Holyrood.

Those same preparatory sessions, incidentally, were adamant that journalists must not double as lobbyists. I found **Open Scotland's** tale of the machinations within the world of lobbying simply fascinating. Since publication, the authors have been granted their wish that lobbyists should face statutory registration. The Standards Committee is presently consulting on a plan to oblige those lobbying on behalf of a third party to register with the Parliament.

Again, that preparation disclosed that the greatest obstacle to full television access was not, as might have been expected, the civil service or the politicians, but sections of the written press who feared that broadcasters would dominate or might unwittingly show them chatting to contacts. A reasonable compromise, permitting TV access, was reached which, I believe, has enhanced the image of Holyrood as an open Parliament. Interviews in 'the Black and White corridor' on the Mound have now become part of the intellectual geography of devolution. It is instructive to note that Westminster is beginning to follow Edinburgh's example.

However, there is concern over retrenchment. As I write, BBC Scotland is submitting evidence to the Parliament's Procedures Committee arguing that the guidelines on open televised coverage of the Chamber should be respected fully - and that 'on the record' should in future mean 'on camera'.

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Open Scotland, then, is only the beginning of what should be a substantial debate. It is, however, a strong and significant start.

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