

## **REVIEW: THE CHALLENGE OF DEVOLUTION**

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Alex Wright (ed.) (2000), **Scotland: the Challenge of Devolution**,  
Aldershot: Ashgate, 282 pp, Hb, £42.50, ISBN 0 7546 1254 6

The flurry of publications which have emerged from the first two years of the Scottish Parliament have to be judged by two criteria. Are they of value in providing some historical record of a seminal period and do they go beyond this and provide some framework for the ongoing analysis of Scottish politics? This book has elements of the latter but could have been more coherent with some pruning and some additions. It inevitably has the faults of a conference-outcome publication.

The core of the book focuses on two themes. One is the nature of the system of political democracy emerging in Scotland. The second theme is that of Scotland's external relations. These are both big issues and the shape of the book would have been better had it been confined to these. However, the title of the book and the scope of a few of the contributions broaden the focus and encourage expectations of a wider content. If the collection were seeking to address issues of social and economic policy options opened up by the new Parliament, it would have had to cover this more comprehensively. As it is, there are chapters on sustainability, culture and economic policy but most of the main policy responsibilities of Holyrood are not touched. This is not a criticism of these individual contributions, but they are out of place.

The first big theme is whether Scotland has moved on from being a modified version of the British political system to being a new democratic model. Several contributors outline the factors which should ensure the 'new model'

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democracy. The case rests on a new voting system which is more proportionate and offers opportunities for smaller parties and independents, on higher representation for women, on a more balanced relationship between Parliament and Executive than at Westminster through a committee system which can hold the Executive to account, investigate and initiate legislation, on more routes into the system for the public through the Parliamentary committees, the Petitions procedure, on more accessible MSPs, on the Civic Forum, and, of course, on more legislative time.

Has the system proved different in practice? There is little the contributors can say on this question with only the evidence of one year at the time of writing. Even with the advantage of an additional year's experience, we are still in an extremely short time-span to judge a new constitutional system. We can look at some evidence but only with great caution. If you travelled back to the establishment of many smaller examples of institutional innovation in Scotland, the first few years were by no means typical of later developments. The Highlands and Islands Development Board had an appalling infancy with financial scandal, internal feuds and negative press. But it later gained a respected position. The Scottish Development Agency, to a lesser extent, had a difficult initiation. The local government regions were hugely unpopular initially but their demise was met with considerable ambivalence. In comparison, the Scottish Parliament and Executive have had some high profile problems but also some significant achievements in their first two years. Interestingly, much of what has been most positive has been the outcome of the new democratic structures rather than the old politics. If we consider some of the developments which the public would regard favourably – the Cubie proposals on student finance, the abolition of warrant sales, free elderly care, domestic abuse legislation, the end of fox-hunting – these have been the product of the new voting system and stronger Parliamentary powers. Other initiatives have had a significant input from civic groups – the McCrone proposals on the teaching profession and new housing legislation are examples. In contrast, some of the notable problems, e.g. the Holyrood building project, arose at least in part because the Parliament was wrongly pre-empted from taking its own decision.

One issue which is not addressed by contributors despite being quite central to the prospect for 'new' politics is the democratic process within the Parliamentary parties. Whatever the formal Parliamentary procedures, a tight whipping system and front bench dominance in debate and decision-making can undermine any formal structures. This is one of the factors which

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threatens effective democratic decision-making. Leadership control is taken to extremes in the Westminster system and while there is greater back-bench status in Holyrood, there are important issues around how policy is decided by the parties, how allocation to committees is made, what the arrangements for contributions to debate are, and what disciplinary procedures are used. We need to shine some brighter lights on party command structures and compare how they operate.

The second main theme of the collection is Scotland's external relations. Trevor Salmon views the detailed exclusion of foreign policy areas from the Scottish Parliament as unrealistic. He rejects the traditionalist view of international relations and emphasises such relations as ranging from 'the great issues of war and peace to tourism, trade, commerce, communications'. This range and complexity will require a significant external dimension to the work of the Executive and Parliament. While the Concordat on International Relations 'negotiated' with Westminster recognises that there has to be consultation, at its core the priority is to ensure that there must be adherence to the UK line. This is a fluid area and we have yet to see whether, without further constitutional change, the Parliament will push its international role creatively and up to the wire.

The relationship with the EU will be the most testing. The Constitutional Convention's aspirations for a European role were more ambitious than the Scotland Act. The participation by right on Council of Ministers delegations was one of the proposals omitted. Alex Wright examines the complexities of the European scene. Despite the new Scotland House base for the Scottish Executive in Brussels with the prospect of a more effective lobbying role and the establishment of a European Committee in the Scottish Parliament to scrutinise legislation and EU developments more rigorously, it is not yet clear whether this is strengthening influence at the key points in European policy process. We have had the issues around BSE and foot and mouth with the potential conflicts of interest with UK policy. We have had the disputes around Additionality. Henry McLeish had his knuckles rapped for supporting a submission for a stronger role for regional governments in the EU. To date, the evidence of a greater scope and effectiveness is probably 'not proven' but it is early days.

Finally, it is a weakness in the book that there is only one contribution on the general issues of civic involvement in the political process. This is a big enough issue to have merited an alternative perspective to that of Grant

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Jordan and Linda Stevenson. It is certainly useful to have a challenge to the widely-based support for encouraging and valuing civic involvement but it would help if it was clearer what their objections are. The principal objection appears to be that the desirable model is to have political parties and elected representatives reflecting an unstructured public opinion. The reality is that, whether we like it or not, membership and activity in political parties is low and an atomised public is especially vulnerable to a highly centralised media and a crude majoritarianism. Small voluntary groups are dismissed as not worthy of a place in the consultation process because their smallness means they are 'not popular'. This is just so ignorant of the nature of voluntary sector organisations that one can only assume it was simply an attempt to strike a controversial pose. There are large numbers of small organisations which have an important contribution to make but which could never be large. They may represent those with an illness or disability, a local interest, or a particular cultural interest. Without their knowledge and advocacy, many important issues would never surface. Some of the rhetoric over the past decade on building consensus may appear to underplay the value of conflict, but what the Consultative Steering Committee report was seeking to reduce was the sterile, predictable oppositionalism of much Westminster politics. No-one is suggesting that anyone other than the elected representatives should take decisions, but without the involvement of a large, varied, active civic sector the process of making decisions would be much impoverished.

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