

## **REVIEW: WOMEN IN SCOTTISH POLITICS**

*Joyce McMillan*

Esther Breitenbach and Fiona Mackay (eds) (2001), **Women in Contemporary Scottish Politics: An Anthology**, Edinburgh: Polygon, 304pp, £16.95, ISBN 190293024X

Before we plunge into its pages, there are three things worth noting about this valuable collection of essays edited for Polygon by Esther Breitenbach and Fiona Mackay. The first is that despite its title – and its cover made up of repeated images of prominent women MSPs – it is not really a book about women in contemporary Scottish politics. There is no study here of women who have reached significant positions in Scottish politics now, or of the experience of those who have failed to do so; indeed, of the 62 sitting Scottish women MSPs, MPs and MEPs listed in a useful if now slightly out-of-date appendix to the text, only one – the former Labour MP Maria Fyfe, who chaired the Scottish Constitutional Convention's Women's Issues Group in the early Nineties – even rates a mention in the body of the book, apart from a brief listing, towards the end, of the five who were appointed ministers in the first Scottish Executive of 1999, and a perfunctory foreword by Wendy Alexander. What the book is, on the other hand, is a comprehensive and useful survey of organised feminist campaigning in Scottish politics between 1979 and 1999, its methods, its impact, and the main issues and challenges it faced; its focus is not on what women did or were prevented from doing, but on the equally significant subject of what feminist groups did, and how their campaigning helped change the climate of Scottish politics over two critically important decades.

The second point to note is that this is not so much a book for reading from start to finish, as a book to keep on the shelf, and to dip into chapter by chapter as an essential resource on recent Scottish political history. As a

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collection of essays written at various times over the last fourteen years, it often has a slightly repetitive quality; essentially, what we see is a small group of campaigners and analysts visiting and revisiting one another's work as the Nineties unfold, examining similar experience and data from slowly shifting perspectives, gradually updating the story in a style that is more incremental than obviously dynamic. And finally, it is worth pointing out that very few of these essays have much to be said for them as pieces of writing. With a handful of exceptions – two vivid short columns by the academic and journalist Sue Innes, Catriona Levy's vigorous 1992 essay 'A Woman's Place?' in the coming Scottish Parliament, or Fiona Mackay's quietly gripping account of the brilliant success, in 1992-95, of the local-government-based Zero Tolerance campaign against violence against women – the twenty essays in the book are generally more dutiful than inspiring, and one or two are so aridly academic in style as to be almost unreadable.

But these reservations apart, there is simply no doubt about the immense value of the wealth of detailed information and analysis contained in this anthology. The book is organised in three sections. The first deals broadly with the main areas of feminist campaigning in Scotland during the Eighties and early Nineties, from Women's Aid and the Rape Crisis movement to the founding of the women's research and information group Engender. There is some fascinating material here, particularly on the evolution of the Women's Aid and Rape Crisis movements into major service providers for women at local level; but it is also this section of the book that is most likely to become sidetracked by theological arguments within the women's movement and women's studies – about 'deradicalisation', the loss of ideological purity, and even the precise naming of the movement – which are probably of limited interest to most readers.

The second section deals with feminist campaigning in Scottish local government and is particularly rich in its analysis of the interface between conscious feminist campaigning and the practical world of local government, where only around 20% of councillors and even fewer senior officials are women, where unreconstructed male attitudes remain widespread, and where many of those women who are present do not consider themselves 'feminists'. The two chapters on the Zero Tolerance Campaign represent a particularly powerful and inspiring account of how a local authority campaign with a clear feminist perspective, brilliantly designed and shrewdly managed in political terms, managed to connect so powerfully with a real hidden strand of Scottish women's experience that few men felt able to object, and even women

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councillors previously unsympathetic to feminist campaigning swung into full support of it, often directly because of their grassroots political experience of the problems faced by women survivors of domestic violence. This section is also illuminating on the steady spread of women's committees and action groups through Scottish local government structures in the late Eighties and Nineties, on how those initiatives survived the drastic local government reform of 1996, and on how the emerging debate on the future government of Scotland provided a useful framework for the continuing development of the women's agenda in Scottish local politics, at a time when parallel initiatives in English local authorities had gone out of fashion and into decline.

The final section of the book therefore moves on to the last phase of the campaign for a Scottish Parliament, between 1989 and 1999, and to the high-profile movement for 50:50 gender equality in that Parliament which helped transform the debate on the future of democracy in Scotland, and generate the pressure which led to the election, in 1999, of a Scottish Parliament with almost 38% female representation, one of the highest proportions of women in any legislature in the world. There is little triumphalism in the eight chapters that make up this section of the book. The outcome of the election may have been little short of revolutionary in a nation whose female representation at Westminster, between 1918 and 1992, had tended to vary somewhere around the 4% mark. But those who had campaigned for a statutory 50:50 representation of women in the Parliament were disappointed; and there are many warnings, in these pages, that the present systems for guaranteeing improved representation of women, operated voluntarily by the Labour Party and the SNP (the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives have ideological objections to any form of positive action), will be endlessly vulnerable to backlash and slippage if women campaigners are ever tempted to rest on their laurels or to 'take their eyes off the ball', to quote one Swedish woman MP.

Still, thanks to the two decades of determined feminist campaigning chronicled in this book, Scotland did achieve, on the brink of the 21st century, what Sue Innes calls in the final chapter of this book the 'quietly thrilling' sight of a parliament which looks much more like real life than any previous elected legislature on this island. In the first Scottish Parliament since 1707, women reached and surpassed that critical mass of around one-third representation which makes it impossible for any institution to develop the kind of male-dominated, men's club ethos that many find so oppressive at Westminster; and as Scotland's new political system evolves, no doubt

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evidence will begin to accrue, not least through the continuing work of many of the contributors to this book, about whether and in what ways the presence of the 48 women MSPs may have made a difference to the quality of Scottish policy-making.

And, in the end, the scale and historical resonance of that achievement gives this workaday collection of essays a sense of shape and drama that is unexpectedly moving; from so many years of hard, dreary, often thankless work in community halls and committee-rooms across Scotland, such a climactic moment of hope fulfilled, and unexpected joy. The work of striving for the full expression of women's equal humanity never ends. But sometimes, as in Scotland in the summer of 1999, it offers moments when we reach a previously unclimbed peak; and catch a brief, breathtaking glimpse of the new landscape ahead.

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